SEPT.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

20¢

ANC.

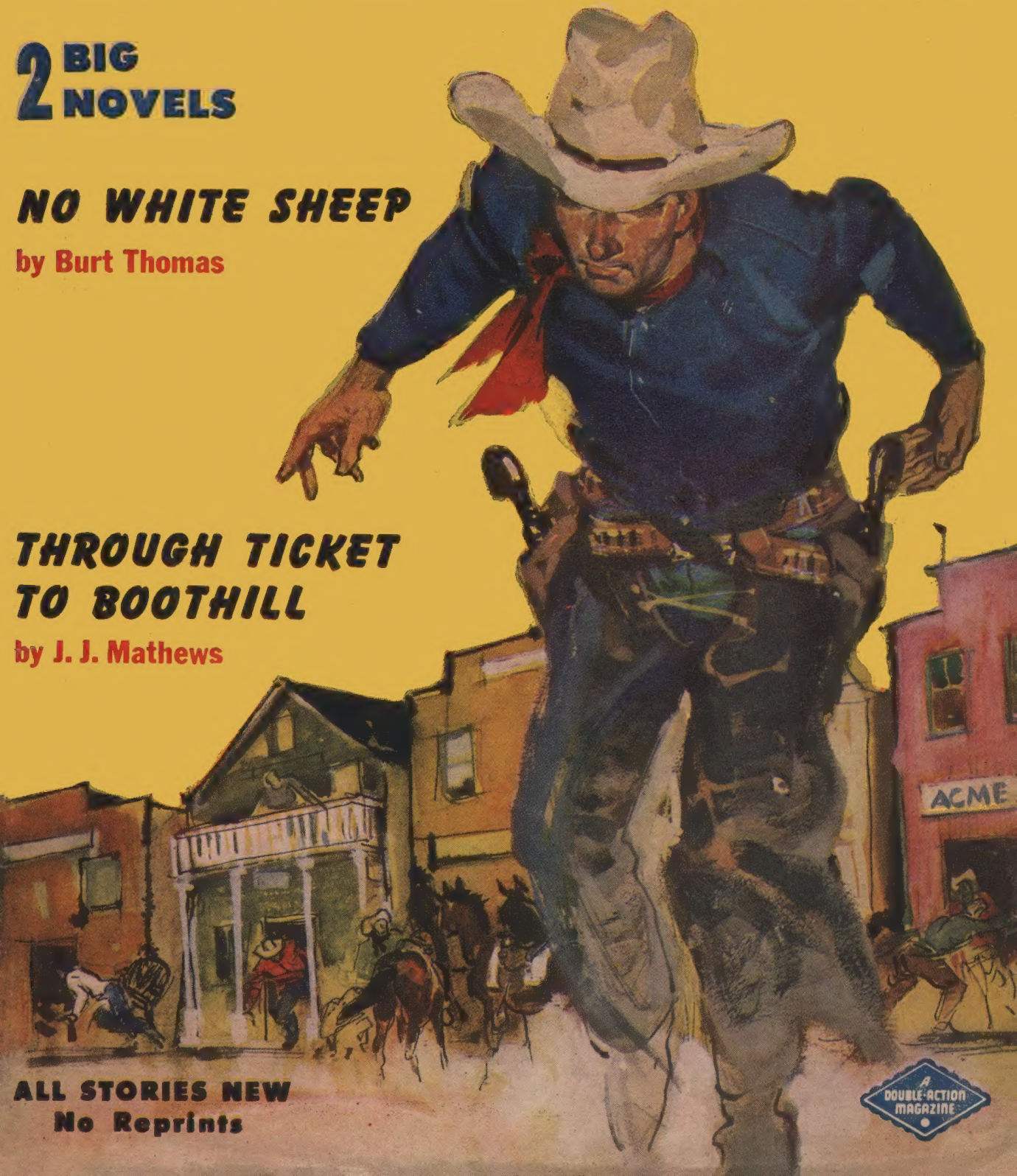
2 BIG NOVELS

NO WHITE SHEEP

by Burt Thomas

THROUGH TICKET TO BOOTHILL

by J. J. Mathews



ALL STORIES NEW
No Reprints

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

THOUSANDS ARE ENJOYING

Rollicking BEDSIDE FUN

. . . and You will too when You possess "the *Pleasure Primer*"

The Ideal Playmate

HERE'S entertainment for open minds and ticklish spines. Here's lusty, merry recreation for unsqueamish men and women. Here's life with apologies to none. Collected, selected from the best there is, this zestful Primer is an eye-opener for the inexperienced; wisdom for designing; merriment for all. It is guaranteed to make the lassies giggle and he-men erupt in boisterous bellyfuls.

Here is no refuge for the strait-laced or satisfaction for the morbid. Served in a highly inviting manner, this pleasureful Primer is a blueprint for uninhibited living. Call it a gay evening's entertainment or an ideal bedside companion, you'll dally over its contents time and time again.

ENJOY IT 10 DAYS FREE!

You are invited to examine the Pleasure Primer 10 days at our expense. It is guaranteed to please or your purchase price will be refunded at once!

Plaza Book Co., 109 Broad St., N.Y.4, N.Y.

TEN DAY TRIAL OFFER

PLAZA BOOK CO., DEPT. P-739
109 Broad St., New York 4, N. Y.

Please send THE PLEASURE PRIMER on 10 day trial. If I'm not pleased, I get my purchase price refunded at once.
☐ Send C.O.D. I'll pay postman 98c plus postage.
☐ I enclose $1. You pay all postage.

Name .....

Address .....

City .....Zone.....State.....

The world on your shoulders

What's ahead for that baby of yours? Happiness? Security? A good education? These, of course, and everything else you can provide. For, above all, you want to be a good father — and a good provider.

That's why you'll find so many young, married men enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools. The average I.C.S. student is 28, employed, married and a father. His biggest concern is security for himself and his family. So he works days and studies nights. And inside of six months, the average student reports a pay raise or a promotion or both. It's a record that we at I.C.S. are proud of — *and a record you can duplicate.*

You owe it to yourself — and your family — to find out more about the "security insurance" that training provides. Information is given free and without obligation. You need only mail the coupon.

Remember, the world is on your shoulders — all ten, precious pounds of it.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

I. C. S. has trained 5,918,692 men and women

BOX 6014-D, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

- ☐ **Air Conditioning**
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Refrigeration, Domestic
- ☐ Refrigeration & Air Conditioning
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Aeronautics Courses

- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting & Design
- ☐ Aircraft Mechanic
- ☐ Engine Mechanic

Architecture

- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Contractor's Building
- ☐ House Planning

Art Courses

- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering

Automotive Courses

- ☐ Automobile ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Auto Electric Technician
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding & Refinishing

Chemical Courses

- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Food-Plant Sanitation
- ☐ Petroleum Production and Refining
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making ☐ Plastics

Civil Engineering

- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses

- ☐ Telegraphy ☐ Telephony

Electrical Courses

- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Diesel Engines

- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines

Mechanical Courses

- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Millwrighting ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Radio Courses

- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ FM and Television Servicing
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing

Railroad Courses

- ☐ Car Inspector and Air Brake
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Stationary Engineering

- ☐ Power Plant Engineering
- ☐ Stationary Fireman

Textile Courses

- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Design Finishing ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Mfg. ☐ Textile Engineering
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business Courses

- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Advertising ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ High School and College
- ☐ Industrial Supervis'n ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Personnel—Labor Relations
- ☐ Postal Civil Service ☐ Retailing
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sales Management ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 20 September, 1952 Number 1

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW

Two Triggerfast Feature Novels

NO WHITE SHEEP ..... **Burt Thomas** 10
"You're a Jordy, and nothing a Jordy does can ever turn out right, even if your intentions are good!"

THROUGH TICKET TO BOOTHILL ..... **J. J. Mathews** 44
Ace Champion finds himself siding a lobo leader, when Don Pesco is framed as a terrorizer of women . . .

Short Stories

BLACK SHEMWELL ..... **Ben Smith** 37
If it's a mistake to hang up your guns, it's even more of an error to take them down again!

STRANGER AT THE GATE ..... **Lon Williams** 85
Sooner or later, Luke Bailey was bound to try his trick on the wrong person . . .

Special Features

THE REAL WEST (*A Department For Western-Story Readers*)
"Lone Survivor" by Lauran Paine 6
"Trail of No Return" by Lee Thomas 90

SCATTERGUN FOR A KILLER ..... **Dave Wilson** 82

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN, SEPTEMBER, 1952, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton St, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Holyoke, Mass. Single copy 20c; yearly subscription $1.20. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable for acceptance. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U. S. A.

Bewitching

She'll be your "Dream Girl" You'll "Bewitch" her with it

Daring "BLACK MAGIC"

"DREAM GIRL" She'll look alluring, breathtaking, enticing, exotic. . . . Just picture her in it . . . beautiful, fascinating SEE-THRU sheer. Naughty but nice. . . . It's French Fashion finery . . . with peek-a-boo magic lace. . . . Gorgeously transparent yet completely practical (washes like a dream . . . will not shrink). Has lacy waistline, lacy shoulder straps and everything to make her love you for it. A charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. . . . In gorgeous Black.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED
or your money back

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 63
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send me DREAM GIRL gown at $9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.

( ) I enclose $9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)

( ) I will pay postman $9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:

32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY
(If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

Heaven Sent

Heaven Sent Oriental Magic

Out of the pages of the Arabian Nights comes this glamorous sheer Harem pajama. You'll look beguiling, alluring, irresistible, enticing. You'll thrill to the sleek, clinging wispy appeal that they will give you. He'll love you for transplanting you to a dream world of adoration centuries old. Brief figure hugging top gives flattering appeal to its daring bare midriff. *Doubled at the right* places, it's the perfect answer for hostess wear. Billowing sheer bottoms for rich luxurious lounging. He'll adore you in this charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. In wispy sheer black.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED
or your money back

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 238
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send "Heaven Sent" pajamas at $9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.

( ) I enclose $9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)

( ) I will pay postman $9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:

32 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY
(If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

Black Sorcery

Daring Bare-back She'll be entranced with it

Your Dream girl will be an exquisite vision of allurement, charm, fascination and loveliness in this exotic, bewitching, daring bare-back filmy sheer gown. It's delicate translucent fabric (washes like a dream) will not shrink.
Have Paris at home, with this cleverly designed halter neck that ties or unties at the flick of a finger. Lavishly laced midriff and peek-a-boo bottom. She'll love you for this charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. In exquisite black sheer.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED
or your money back

DREAM GIRL FASHIONS, Dept. 337
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send BLACK SORCERY gown at $9.95. If not entirely satisfied, I'll return within 10 days for full cash refund.

( ) I enclose $9.95 cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid (I save up to 90c postage). (You may get it at our store too!)

( ) I will pay postman $9.95 plus postage. Check size wanted:

22 34 36 38 40 IN BLACK ONLY
(If you don't know the size send approximate height and weight)

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

The Real West

★ ★ ★ ★

A Department For Lovers Of Western Lore And Fiction

★ ★ ★ ★

LONE SURVIVOR

by Lauran Paine

HISTORY and general ignorance have confused the classic story of the Battle Of The Little Big Horn, until today even American historians concede that there were no survivors of the massacre of General George A. Custer and his valiant Seventh Cavalry.

There were *two* survivors. One was a horse, badly wounded, and found by the relief-column bleeding, lame and exhausted; the animal was taken back to civilization, nursed to health, and cared for as the only living symbol of the courage and forlorn bravery of Reno's and Custer's split command. This horse lived to a very old age, and died, having enjoyed the sympathetic benevolence of Americans for many years. He was buried with honors, and a plaque stands in commemoration of his service in the bloodiest and most futile battle ever fought by American cavalrymen.

The actual history of the Battle Of The Little Big Horn will never be known in its entirety because no "white" men survived to write it down, and the Indian participants did not believe in recording history; so, except for fragments of vocal history from Indians who fought there, the many facets that go to make up a battle, are lost forever.

However, of one fact there can be no doubt; this is simply that one of the fighters with Custer's Brigade *did* survive the battle and escape, finally to die—an old man with many scars and gruesome memories—in 1923.

It was the custom of American military forces in the early West to employ Indian scouts. This was essential, not only because these scouts were superior to "whites" as trackers, but also because their mental processes paralleled those of the people they were hired to find. Thus, the army could move almost as fast in pursuit of their prey as the Indians could move in attempting elusion.

In employing Indian scouts, the army tried to employ natives whose tribes were known to be hostile, or antipathetic, toward the tribe or band wanted. This dubious strategy was responsible for the employment of Crow scouts by the Custer command, in the search for the Ogalala Sioux. The Crow Indians were hereditary and acknowledged enemies of the Sioux; consequently, they were easily recruited by the army for service in leading soldiers against the Sioux.

Among the Crow scouts with Custer's brigade was a stocky, intelligent, and amiable Indian named Curley. Curley was born in 1857; he was a man quick to learn and took easily to the "white man's ways". He was an excellent rifle-shot, fond of a practical

[*Turn To Page* 8]

MEN! WOMEN! take orders for famous NYLONS GUARANTEED 9 MOS.

ONLY YOUR SPARE TIME NEEDED

Look at these Exceptional FIRST WEEK EARNINGS

Space permits mentioning only these few exceptional cases, but they give you an idea of the BIG MONEY that is possible in this business starting the very first week.

Mr. E. L. Lippard, Texas — **$59.32 first week**

Mr. Clarence Bush, New York — **$41.24 first week**

Mr. Ralph Shearer, Ky. — **$67.11 first week**

Mr. Horatio de LaRoche, Cal. — **$68.84 first week**

Mr. Boyd Shaw, Tenn. — **$53.46 first week**

Mr. W. F. Gardner, N. C. — **$63.49 first week**

Mrs. Arnold Junge, Mich. — **$64.68 first week**

Mrs. Fred Pillath, Jr., Wis. — **$41.82 first week**

Mrs. Morton House, Ga. — **$48.92 first week**

Mrs. Hazel McClean, Ill. — **$40.35 first week**

Mrs. Pearl Elvern, Minn. — **$63.87 first week**

Mrs. Pete Dickson, Ohio — **$81.32 first week**

NYLONS GUARANTEED NINE MONTHS

Sensational Guarantee is creating a tremendous demand for Wilknit Nylons! Mrs. Robert Franklin of Ohio started out with me and made $56.00 the very first week. Mr. Cadman, of Rhode Island, did even better. His first week's earnings amounted to $69.37. Mrs. R. E. Page of Massachussetts chalked up $177.94 worth of orders first week out. These exceptional earnings give you an idea of possibilities.

GUARANTEED AGAINST RUNS—WEAR AND EVEN SNAGS! Why is it so easy for Wilknit Salespeople to get orders? I'll tell you—It's because we stand back of Wilknit Nylons with the most amazing guarantee you have ever heard of. Your customers can wear out their hose. They can develop runs. They can even snag or rip them. No matter what happens to make Wilknit Nylons unwearable . . . within 9 months . . . depending on quantity . . . we replace them free of charge under terms of our guarantee.

No wonder women are anxious to buy Wilknit! And no wonder it is easy to quickly build up fine STEADY year around income. Earnings start immediately. Look at these exceptional figures—Ralph Shearer made $67.11 first week. Mrs. Paul Estes $42.82—Mrs. Ivy Gentry $43.37. Doris Jensen in addition to making as much as $17.00 in a day, earned 2 cars as EXTRA bonuses.

A Car in 2 Months PLUS $1,007.60 Cash!

"Naturally I was honored winning a new car and I am happy to have won the car in two months when we had a whole year to win it in. My commission for two months totaled $1,007.60. I have earned as much as $50.00 a day and $30.00 to $40.00 a day commissions have not been unusual. It is a high privilege and I may say an honor to represent the Wilknit Hosiery Co."

Frank C. Schulz

FUR COAT ALSO GIVEN!

($500.00 Retail Value includes Federal Excise Tax)
Genuine I. J. FOX Creation

If you already have a car you can get this beautiful I. J. Fox Fur Coat instead of a car. Or you can get both Car *and* Coat without paying out a penny.

SEND NO MONEY — JUST NAME AND HOSE SIZE

JUST MAIL COUPON. When you send for Selling Outfit, I also send your choice of Nylons or Socks for your personal use. Just rush your name for the facts about the most sensational line of hosiery for men, women and children ever offered. At this time we are appointing a limited number of men and women. Be first in your locality with WILKNIT'S most beautiful hosiery of the year—every pair guaranteed for quick, easy and profitable sale. Mail the coupon or a postcard today, and learn at once how you, too, can earn big money in FULL or SPARE TIME and qualify for an EXTRA BONUS over and above your daily cash earnings.

L. Lowell Wilkin

WIL-KNIT HOSIERY CO., INC.

9829 MIDWAY, GREENFIELD, OHIO

L. Lowell Wilkin, WIL-KNIT HOSIERY CO., Inc. — *Be Sure to Send Hose Size*
9829 Midway, GREENFIELD, OHIO

Please rush all facts about your guaranteed hosiery money-making plan and FREE CAR or FUR COAT offer. Everything you send me now is FREE.

MY HOSE SIZE IS_____

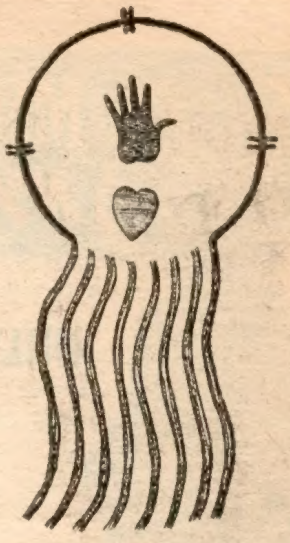
NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ ZONE_____ STATE_____

The wavy lines at the bottom of this design are yellow, indicating Custer's yellow hair. The circle is red, symbolizing the span of Custer's bloody career. Naturally, since Sioux warriors ate the hearts of their enemies, the heart is self-explanatory. The hand (orange) symbolizes the hand of the warrior who struck Custer down.

This award was approved by Sitting Bull, but was never used because tribal leaders wisely forbade any Sioux to display it; retaliation would surely have followed its display.



joke, a shrewd horse-trader—which many "whites" learned to their discomfort—and was generally liked by all.

Curley knew, as did all the other Crow scouts that George A. Custer, or "Long Hair" as the Indians called him, was bad medicine not only for the Seventh Cavalry, but for the "whites" in general. The Indians sized Custer up as a man who was bent on attaining personal glory at the expense of broken treaties and dead bodies; they hated him as a trouble-maker, and suspected that he would not hesitate to commit any act that would bring promotion and acclaim to himself. General George A. Custer was spoken of with hatred and contempt even by the Crows, and around Sioux council fires he was identified as the Indian's foremost enemy. Chief Crazy Horse, who commanded the Sioux warriors at Little Big Horn, even went so far as to design a coup, or war-honor, especially for the man who killed Custer. This decoration could never be displayed by a sagacious war leader, but was nevertheless an award coveted by all Northwestern Indians who opposed Custer.

Curley went with Custer and Reno when they invaded the Ogalala Sioux territory. This invasion, in itself, was a flagrant breach of promise. Chief Red Cloud of the Ogalala Sioux had, only a short time before, signed a peace-treaty with the American government after four long and bitter years of war. The "whites" had, among other things, agreed to stay out of Ogalala territory. Significantly, Chief Red Cloud—to whom honor was a virtue above all others—flatly refused to fight Custer, and thus break his own treaty, despite the fact that the army had broken the treaty. To Red Cloud, honor was above the meanness and deceit employed by the Americans; embittered though he was, he would not lower himself to their level.

UNDER ORDERS from General Terry, his immediate superior, Custer drove into Ogalala territory for the express purpose of keeping the harrassed Sioux from retreating into Canada, where they sought to escape persecution. These Sioux, incidentally, were not a war party; they were the combined branches of the Sioux tribe who had been assured by Sitting Bull —their greatest Medicine Man—that, in Canada, they would be safe from persecution, and free to hunt and live as their fathers had lived.

At the time of Custer's "last stand",

[*Turn To Page* 89]

APPEAR SLIMMER INSTANTLY!

With the Amazing TUMMY FLATTENING COMMANDER

INTERLOCKING HANDS OF FIRM SUPPORT*

Only $2.98

Test now how you'll feel wearing the COMMANDER this way: clasp hands across the abdomen as shown and press up and in. Feel good? Protruding stomach held in? That's how you'll look and feel when you put on the COMMANDER. No leg bands, buckles, straps or laces. Changeable crotch piece.

FREE 10 DAY TRIAL OFFER

Convince yourself. See the amazing difference with your own eyes. Try the appearance reducing COMMANDER at our expense. If not delighted with the immediate results, return in 10 days for immediate refund. Sent in Plain Wrapper by Return Mail. Don't wait! Act NOW!

*TRADE MARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFFICE

SEND NO MONEY!

WARD GREEN CO. Dept. P-769
113 West 57th Street, New York 19, N.Y.

Rush COMMANDER on approval in Plain Wrapper by Return Mail. I'll pay postman $2.98 plus postage. If not delighted with immediate results, I may return in 10 days for immediate refund. (Special Large Sizes 48 to 60—$3.98.)

MY WAIST MEASURE IS.....

Name.....

Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

☐ I enclose $2.98 (or $3.98 for sizes 48 to 60). Ward Green Co. pays postage. Same refund offer holds.

☐ Also send..... extra crotch pieces. (75¢ each, 3 for $2.00.)

The new church was on fire, and a hastily-formed bucket-brigade was working desperately.

NO WHITE SHEEP

Black was his heritage, and dark the road he followed, this youngster who'd never been a boy. And heavy in his shame-filled heart was the knowledge that there were no white sheep among the Jordys — black were their deeds, and cursed their every effort to make things right..

By Burt Thomas

FRANK JORDY hugged the rough slab wall of the blacksmith shop. No lamplight could reach him there, no moonlight to gleam on the gun in his hand. He crouched, tense, shivering. Something had gone amiss at the bank up the street. He had heard the muffled explosion. Now the silence held overlong.

Two Jordy brothers, Sime and Val, would be in the bank with their father, big Matt Jordy. And their timing was smooth. It was not their first bank job.

"But the tightest of schemes," Frank half-whispered under his breath, "can blow up like a blind bucker at the drop of the wrong hat!"

Yet the silence held. No wild shots pounded the night, and he took courage. There could be no slip-up. Heck Jordy, another brother, watched the opposite end of the street. And Kansas City Jack and The Nester held horses at opposite sides of town, extra mounts. The Jordy boys would not be caught short.

But still the signal never came.

Frank Jordy slid along the wall, the heavy gun sweaty in his grip. Another step and he would brave open moonlight. He held his breath, hesitating.

The premonition of failure lay heavy on his mind. Since he had been old enough to hold a gun, since the first time he had been taken along to help on a raid, he had dreaded this— this reckoning hour when all signs turned wrong.

The older brothers had scoffed at him. Sure, they had fought running gun battles with the law. There was even the time they had to ease old Matt out of a cow-town lock-up with a couple of crow bars, when a gun barrel over the skull failed to make the deputy see the light. But they always got away, didn't they?

Young Frank wanted none of it. The life sickened him, constantly dodging the law, living by the gun. But the years rolled on and the Jordys were miraculously lucky. It was big country, new and raw and open. Robbery and looting raised a mighty cry, but anger died quickly. Men

were on the move. Old excitements were soon forgotten.

Frank had turned nineteen, a man in a life that knew no boyhood. And the way of the outlaw remained a steady, burning shame in his soul. He had acquired extra skill with his gun—to stop pursuit without killing. For up to now he had taken no man's life. But that knowledge remained his only solace.

He stood frozen in the deep shade of the blacksmith shop, his thin frame hunched forward, blue eyes straining for a glimpse of movement, every nerve on edge. With his free left hand he cautiously tightened his hat down on his thick dark hair.

At last came a thread of sound—bootheels thumping the plank walk. Sweat started in little streams down Frank's ribs. It was not the cry of a prowling tomcat, Matt Jordy's favorite signal. Nor was it the lobo call for help.

It could be only a late wandering cowhand, Frank told himself. Some waddy just waking up from a drunk.

But the steps were hurried now, running. He knew when they left the planks; the dust of the open street made soft sucking sounds as a man's boots pushed through it.

ABRUPTLY, a tall well-knit figure moved into view by the corner of the lumberyard wall. A stranger, young and lithe of movement. He was so close that Frank could see the grim expression about his mouth in the moonlight, the little crinkles at the corner of his right eye.

The man shifted his position, waiting, and Frank choked silently on his own breath. A gleaming deputy's badge hung from the tobacco-sack that filled his shirt pocket.

Frank raised his gun arm slowly, his mind reeling. Death hovered like a dust-mote in the still air.

But his weapon did not speak. The shot came from up the street, the flat bark of Val's .38—even in the empty night its tone differed from the .45's the rest of the boys carried.

The deputy made a soft, choking noise. Frank stared and felt his own belly knot up. The bullet had struck the lawman in the throat. But the man did not fall. He stood against the rough board wall of the lumber yard, hands pressed back to the boards, feet braced wide, while his life-blood gurgled out and spilled down across his shirt.

Frank stared, frozen. There stood a fellow human being, young, alert, law-abiding, law-upholding—a man who should not have to die. But he was dying.

Blood spilled down over the law-badge and into the dust. Still the man stood. His face turned waxen in the moonlight and his wide-open eyes looked into Frank's with the vacant stare of death.

Other shots were hammering the night, a wild backdrop of sound. Yelling voices echoed, strange voices. And the rap of bootheels became a clatter. With violent force of will, he pulled his eyes from the staring face and dove for the rear of the blacksmith shop, his stomach churning, retching.

A cottonwood grew by the corner of the shop and beyond it lay a pool of darkness. Further on, a slow stream soaked through an acre of marsh, then trickled on down the valley through willow and alder and blackberry growth.

Frank ran choking through the darkness. He caught his sweaty gun by the barrel and flung it from him, far into the marsh. Still stumbling on, he stripped off holster and shell-belt and sent them after the gun. He ran free then, gathering speed, as though distance could erase the scene from his mind.

A fit of nausea brought him up reeling, and he doubled over with the violence of the spasm. But still he stumbled on, and the soft marsh tugged at his boots and hooked thorns served to steady him, to drive away

the dizziness. And he became aware of his own actions. He was running away. He had deserted his brothers. He had failed the Jordy clan!

A flood of bitter shame stopped him in his tracks. Matt Jordy would be looking for him. The Nester would be holding one of the sorrels ready for him to hit the saddle. Frank took one hesitant step back through the clinging mud. It was too late. The shooting had stopped. A new wave of sound drifted out of the night, the wild cry of vengeance, the call to the hunt.

Weakly, Frank pushed on into marsh. By instinct he found the main course of the stream and waded down its center, heedless of the low-hanging willows and the alder branches that slapped into his face and tore at his arms.

He was not the first of the brothers to break away, he consoled himself. His older brother, Floyd, had been gone nearly four years—so long he could hardly remember him at all. Floyd had sickened on the lonely outlaw life and left it for good. His name was never mentioned in the camp.

Frank, too, had often dreamt of leaving the outlaw crew for a better life. His plans through the years had been many and varied, changing always as he grew older and gained experience.

He had wanted a quiet farewell, a solemn handshake all around. Never had he imagined this sudden, violent break, this desertion. Sick with shame, head down, he slowly pushed his waterlogged boots through the slime of the creek-bed as the din of the hunt faded farther and farther behind him.

●

THE GRAY morning light found Frank Jordy waist-deep in running water, his thin body chilled through, so numb it took all his strength to drag himself from the stream. Teeth rattling, he gathered dry prairie hay and built a nest under a wild-rose thicket and while the predawn twittering of birds still sounded along the willows, he burrowed in, resolved to keep his mind a blank, not even to think.

But the dying deputy's face looked out of every shadow, a curse upon all men who lived beyond the law. Frank squeezed his eyes shut, shivering. If Val had not fired when he did, then he, Frank, could have been the killer.

Lawmen were committed to death, he reasoned. It was a part of their job. But for what? So that the Jordys could go free to enjoy their night's loot?

Maybe, he thought, if his family had suffered more tragedy, if the outlaw crew had tasted death and he had known first-hand the deep-burning fire for revenge, he could better hate the law.

But the Jordys had been running in foolhardy luck. Old Matt kept the crew to itself out of towns and away from other owlhoot roosts. And even when one of the boys blundered they always managed to pull clear and laugh it off. Until last night!

Frank shuddered. Now it would be always in his past.

●

He was awakened just at sundown by the crackling of brush and a thump of footsteps on hard ground. Instinctively he grabbed for his gun and felt a hollow ache of fear to find it gone. But the sound had come only from a feeding steer.

He crawled out stiff and lame and sore bedraggled as a ditched hobo, and headed up out of the valley. He was free. There was no pursuit. He was free and alone!

But where to now? He had left the Jordy clan behind. There were no other relatives unless... One chill, windy day in a northern Montana town, Matt Jordy had pointed to an old Blackfeet squaw and snorted, "'Damn my soul if that ain't my old

mother-in-law! Plumb forgot I was gettin' so close to home!" And he had added a bit of profanity and turned away quickly to ride down another street.

Frank had only one quick look at a kindly brown face, patient and age-withered. His grandmother. It didn't seem possible. The rest of the Jordys had dark eyes, swarthy skin. Frank's hair was straight and black, but his eyes were clear blue. He could hardly think of himself as Indian. And that Montana town was too far away now, far way and in the past.

Hunger created a more immediate problem. He carried money, a fair amount in a hidden money belt, because he had found little opportunity to spend his share from past raids. But he could not venture into town. There was small chance that he would be known, but he was unfamiliar with town life and always ill at ease. His behavior might trip him up.

Gaunt and lame, he trudged up over the range of hills to the south and into the next valley. It appeared wild and uninhabited, but under the clear glow of the moon he kept on, doggedly.

•

BY NOON of the next day he knew that Jordy luck still rode his shoulders. He stumbled on a lonesome ranch where he was met by a grizzled old bachelor and two barking dogs and the invitation: "Coffee pot's on. Better git your feet under the kitchen table and let a notch out of your belt!"

The rancher needed a hay hand for a few weeks. He was a man who spoke seldom and asked no questions, and Frank pitched into the work. He gave his name as Dan Smith. From here on he would remain Dan Smith. he decided. Frank Jordy had vanished that night in the little town of Larkspur where a bank had been robbed and a deputy shot in the throat. Frank Jordy no longer existed. Dan Smith started life as though with a clean slate.

But Dan Smith, hay-hand, missed the close association of the Jordy clan, big Matt's sage advice, Sime's strict planning, Heck's badgering and hazing, even Val's drunken songs—for Val had been the only brother who craved whiskey. And there had been the knife tricks that Kansas City Jack gloried in, and The Nester, pale-eyed, silent little man, always lost in his own world of reverie.

No news leaked into the isolated ranch, no word about the robbery at Larkspur, no clue to the fate of the Jordys.

Dan Smith, hay hand, found the days growing lonesome, and the nights were a thousand hours long. At the end of the month, with his wages and a trifle from his belt, he bought a little bay saddle mare and stock saddle from the rancher and moved on.

One man remained he could turn to—his brother Floyd. The ties of blood were too strong to be quickly broken. Floyd was another Jordy who had left the crew for a better way of life, and he would understand Frank's break. The two brothers would have much in common.

Floyd Jordy had taken the name of Ingram, the rumor went. And he had been seen in the town of Devil's Fork.

The little mare was slow with age and the weathered-out saddle a poor fit, but with patience, Dan Smith crowded the miles behind him. His grub supply gave out days too soon, and he pushed on, lean-bellied.

At last a storm-blurred, sun-baked post pointed to Devil's Fork. Dan Smith, hay hand or perhaps cowhand. now that he owned horse and saddle,

turned the little bay's nose toward the distant jumble of buildings.

2

AGAIN, caution slowed his hand. He reined up at the first houses in the outskirts of town and would have turned back to wait for darkness if a young woman in neat checkered gingham hadn't walked down to a white picket gate and nodded to him.

The little mare, looking for a handout, pushed up to the gate. Dan Smith could only stare. The young woman had just hurried from a new, white-painted house set back in the picket-fenced yard, and she wore no bonnet. Her hair stood around her head in ringlets of pale red-gold.

Like his favorite sorrel mare, Dan thought, the one that had been shot in a getaway one night. A color he could never forget.

The young woman was looking right at him. "I beg your pardon," she said, her face a trifle flushed. "I thought you were the man Dad had sent for—"

Dan suddenly remembered to take off his battered hat. "No," he replied, shaking his head. "I'm just—" He hesitated. "I reckon I'm lookin' for a job." A job in this town, he thought quickly, would be his best move. Any job. He could make a place for himself, get to know the town before hunting up Floyd.

The young woman looked him up and down. She had gray-green eyes, he noticed. And she was younger than he had first thought, a mere girl. She had a little patch of freckles across her nose.

Her close scrutiny made him suddenly aware of his tattered shirt, his faded Levis and sweat-stained hat. His dark growth of beard too, though it covered his hollow cheeks, didn't help.

"Maybe," the girl offered, "Dad could use you. Can you do carpenter work?"

"I reckon," Dan replied, grinning, "that a man can do most anything when he gets hollow enough in here!" And he pressed a hand against his stomach.

The girl smiled with quick warmth. "Take your horse around to the barn," she said. "I'll have dinner on the table by the time you can wash up!"

Dan rode down the path the girl pointed out, a new tingling in his blood. Never had he realized how lonesome his life had been.

But over the wash basin on the back porch his doubts returned. What would he say to this girl? How would he act? He had lived away in a bachelor camp too long. Try as he would he could never remember all the things Val and Heck had said about the girls they knew in the different towns.

But the girl gave him no chance to talk. She heaped his plate with mashed potatoes and gravy, with pork chops and hot biscuits and she kept his coffee cup steaming full.

"I sure thank you, Missus—" he mumbled between bites.

The girl laughed. "You are welcome. And I'm not a missus, yet! There are a number of girls in this town who have married at eighteen, but I'm willing to wait a few years." She filled his coffee cup. "I'm Elaine Cooper. And my father is Emmet Cooper, the carpenter."

Elaine Cooper. Dan repeated the name to himself, enjoying the tone of it. Elaine. And only eighteen, a year younger than he. And what a cook!

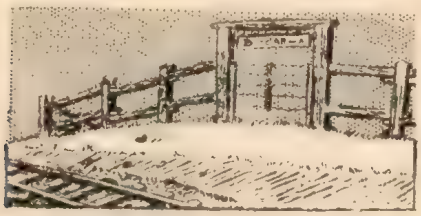
"I'm—Dan Smith," he replied. "Hay hand, cowpuncher—and maybe a carpenter."

Elaine laughed. "Eat hearty, Dan Smith. You'll need plenty of biscuits under your belt to be a carpenter!"

And she shoved three more onto his plate.

•

DAN WAS hunched over a work bench in the tool shed polishing the rust off an old saw that Elaine had found for him, when Emmet Cooper came home. The carpenter was a man of medium height, muscular but not stocky. He had streaks of gray in his coppery hair and a calm, quiet look about his square-jawed face.



"My daughter says you are going to be a carpenter," he remarked with just a trace of twinkle in his gray eyes.

Dan nodded. "I'll do my best."

"No man could do more. For the present you'll work for me as a helper and learn the tricks of the trade." He looked Dan over carefully. "Did Elaine tell you where you can bunk? No? Well, you'll find a bed in that spare room off the back porch. And you can board with us."

"I sure thank you—" Dan replied quickly.

Cooper grinned. "I've got a spare razor, if you want to spruce up a bit. Might even find a shirt around that would fit you. Tomorrow bein' Sunday we won't be working. But Elaine and I would be right glad to have you go to church with us—"

Church! Dan felt a chill settle over him as though he had stepped outside in zero weather without his jacket. He, Frank Jordy, going to church!

His only touch with religion had been the little Bible he had found in an abandoned shack. He had smuggled it into his bedroll and The Nester had helped him read it, explaining the long words. But even it had been left behind.

And now he was going to church! Cold sweat stood on his brow as he thanked Emmet for the invitation and said he would go.

•

Later, working over a basin with razor and soap, Dan felt a warmth of satisfaction he had never known before, a feeling of belonging, of home and permanence and security not to be risked at the snap of a six-gun. This was a new life. This was living!

Emmet Cooper seemed an honest, straight-talking, hard-working man. And Elaine—she was nothing at all like the coy, flirting, painted females Val and Heck told about! She seemed straightforward and easy to talk to as Sime or The Nester.

And they had both accepted him at face value. Dan looked at the shirt Emmet had brought for him to wear and he flushed with a quick sense of guilt.

What would they think of him, he wondered, if they knew he carried enought cash in his money-belt to buy a hundred shirts, and plenty to spare? Money marked with blood and gunpowder!

The belt lay like a fiery band against his skin. All his promises to himself that Dan Smith was starting with a clean slate. If Elaine hadn't been cooking supper on the big kitchen range, he would have ripped off the belt and chucked the whole thing into the flames!

IN THE bright sunshine of Sunday morning Dan had his first look at the town of Devil's Fork. He had brushed his hat and polished his boots and slicked himself up the best he could for the occasion. And as Elaine joined him, all decked out in her Sunday best, for the walk through town to the church, his pulse raced and set up such a ringing in his ears that he could hardly make out what she said.

In quick embarrassment he felt his neck turning red and he swore under his breath that he'd give everything he owned if Emmet hadn't gone on ahead to talk to the preacher and left him to bring Elaine. He had never been so uncomfortable and so happy at the same time since the Christmas he was ten and tried on his brand new boots!

But from force of old habit, Dan took sharp notice of the buildings along the main street—the mercantile, the Elite Saloon, a saddle shop, and the Cattlemen's Bank.

At sight of the bank's shining glass windows, Dan felt a cold tremor in the pit of his stomach. As far as he could remember, the Jordys had never taken Devil's Fork. Maybe they had stayed away because of Floyd. Or maybe Sime or Heck would be in town right now checking over the layout. Dan shivered and quickened his pace.

He kept on the lookout, too, for the tall figure of Floyd Jordy—or Floyd Ingram, as he would be known. He had all but forgotten how Floyd looked, but he was sure to resemble the rest of the Jordys, tall, dark-eyed, black-haired, swarthy. There would be no mistaking him.

Down the side street past the bank stood the livery stable and the sprawling lumber yard, and across the main street loomed a high-fronted, two-story frame hotel, and beyond it, Kesselman's Gun Shop. But still no sign of Floyd.

Past the gun shop stood a big unfinished building

"The church," Elaine announced, her gray-green eyes alight. "Where you will be working with Daddy tomorrow. They are holding services in Kesselman's barn behind the gun shop until the new church is finished."

Dan's throat tightened. He would be building a church. It was no right job for a Jordy. Somehow he didn't feel qualified. He belonged out on the wild range. Yet he had taken the job, given his word. Suddenly he felt caught, stifled, hemmed in by the closeness of the town.

And in the crowded Kesselman barn it was even worse. He felt as nervous as a green bronc at a railway station. But Elaine had a firm grip on his arm. He couldn't bolt and run for it. Desperately he stared about him, seeking his tall brother.

The Reverend William Jaines came in then and stepped up to the improvised pulpit. Dan knew it was too late. He could never get away.

The singing brought a lump to his throat, but it was the sermon that held him spellbound. Here was a man who spoke of the Bible. And like the Bible, his words were clear, precise and full of meaning. Every challenge seemed aimed at Dan himself. The words cut deep, but he was glad that he had come.

At close of services, the minister spoke of the new building and praised the work—and mentioned the money they still needed. And yet Dan, red-faced, had found no loose cash in his pocket to drop in the collection plate.

HE STRODE out of the building with the crowd, but outside he left Elaine with her father and with a hurried excuse slipped back inside. Only one old lady, dressed in deep black mourning, knelt and prayed, head bowed. Dan tip-toed to the front, found the full collection plate still there, and glanced around him.

The old lady had raised her head, watching him. Hastily, he too knelt down and bowed his dark head, but under his shirt his fingers found the buckle of his money-belt and slipped it lose. Another instant and he had piled the belt, thick with sweat-stained bills, into the crowded collection plate.

He rose to his feet, flushed with a feeling of triumph he had never known before and fairly floated out of the building.

The three walked home together to a Sunday dinner, but the words of the sermon stuck in Dan's mind. The

Brotherhood of Man—and his own brother somewhere in this very town.

"I knew a man once," he remarked, trying to keep his voice casual, careless, "from this town." He hesitated. "That is— I worked with a feller who knew him. His name was Floyd Higham, or Ingram—or some such name. Ever hear of him?"

Elaine's eyes went round and Emmet scowled. "There's a Boyd Ingram in Devil's Fork," he replied.

Dan caught his breath. Boyd Ingram. That could be Floyd. The name was close. He had struck the right town!

"Big tall dark man," Emmet went on. "Scar on his chin."

Dan gripped the window frame and stared out into the yard. He had forgotten the scar. But he dared not let on yet that he even knew Boyd Ingram. Not yet! Something in Emmet's tone—

"Think he's your man?" the carpenter persisted.

Dan started. "No; must not be. Feller I heard about was short, stocky—" He laughed shakily. "Names fool a man."

But had his lie fooled Emmet and his daughter? He felt cheap trying to deceive them. What would they think of him when they found out the real relationship? He cursed himself for his stupid blundering.

●

Sunday afternoon they sat on the front porch and Elaine brought out old family albums, pictures of her childhood, other homes she had known. The thought saddened Dan. He knew nothing of his own childhood, he realized. Absolutely nothing. Maybe, when he talked to Floyd—but the look on Emmet Cooper's face when he had mentioned Boyd Ingram's name rang a warning bell. Dan dared not inquire again about the man.

●

SHORTLY after sunrise, Dan and Emmet, loaded with tools, headed for the job. They passed the same buildings, just stirring into activity, but crossing to the other side of the street, Dan had a look down a different block of the side street.

Here was the land office, another saloon and a saddle shop. And beyond the shop stood a glittering structure with a big swinging sign lettered in gold—*The Palace*.

It was a large building with a false front pushed up high behind a railed, second-floor gallery. The first floor he could hardly make out for the blinding reflection of sunlight from a hundred small window panes daubed inside with gold paint.

"What an outfit!" Dan exclaimed, squinting against the glare. "They sell gold bricks—or rainbows?"

"A little of both," Emmet replied soberly.

"Must do a good business." Already several saddled horses stood at the long hitchrack in front of the building.

"That's Boyd Ingram's place. Crookedest gambling hole in town. Even his liquor would burn the whiskers of an alley cat."

Dan felt his knees giving away, and he dropped a hammer. Boyd Ingram. It couldn't be. Floyd had left the crew to start—but maybe this man wasn't Floyd after all. Dan grasped at a straw of hope. Even with the scar, he could be a different Ingram.

"You see that unfinished section of the *Palace* jutting out back," Emmet was saying. "Ingram is hot on my neck because I won't drop the job I'm on and build a big fancy glitter-and-shine dance hall on there for him."

Dan caught a deep breath.

"Couldn't he hire some other carpenter?"

"Not around here. Busy season comin' on for all the ranchers. Every man who can straddle a bronc is takin' to saddle. That's why I hired you before you could change your mind."

Dan was glad of the hard work. It kept his mind off Boyd Ingram. Until he saw the man himself he could cling to a faint hope. If Floyd *had* turned crooked, why hadn't the Jordys known?

•

Shortly before noon two men sauntered up the street. One stopped in the shadow of Kesselman's gun shop, the other strode on up to the unfinished building.

Dan had been too busy to pay close attention to them until Emmet spoke in a low voice. "Here it comes. Boyd Ingram's daily inspection!"

Dan glanced at the slim, dapper, black-eyed man standing in the unfinished church door. "Ingram?" he asked hopefully. This slim hardcase bore no resemblance to Floyd Jordy.

Emmet snorted. "Boyd Ingram would never get that close to a church. That's Slim Romas, his right-hand gunman." He raised his voice. "Mornin', Brother Romas—if you come to church as often when it's finished, I'll personally buy you a new hat!"

Romas stared, hard-eyed. "What gives you the idee it'll ever be finished?" He turned on Dan. "You—Pilgrim! Lookin' for a *good* job? Ingram will pay you double."

Dan turned his back, his blood rising. Loyalty to a job was something a man didn't trifle with. But reaching for a hammer, he caught a glimpse of the man in the shadow of the gun shop. Dan froze, suddenly paralyzed. That was a Jordy—as much like big Matt Jordy as either Heck or Sime. More of a Jordy than he, Dan Smith, would ever be! That was Floyd Jordy—or Boyd Ingram. That was the brother who had left the crew!

Slim Romas walked over past the gun shop, and the two men sauntered back down the street together. There could be no mistake. It was Boyd Ingram of the glittering *Palace*.

Dan kept his head turned and prayed that the saloon-man had not recognized him. Weakly, he grasped a hammer and fumbled for nails, his mind reeling with the shock of discovery. Floyd Jordy a crooked gambler, a deadfall saloon-owner. Floyd, who had deserted the crew to go straight. He might as well have stayed with the rest of the family. It was bitter truth there were no white sheep in the Jordy clan!

But now he, Frank—or Dan Smith, had pulled away. Would *he* be able to keep his slate clean from here on? He felt suddenly weak and alone. Glancing at Boyd Ingram's tall figure fading down the street, he knew that now he was cut off from the last of the Jordys. He had to be entirely on his own.

EMMET WAS cursing softly, and the words sounded odd, coming from the quiet-mannered carpenter. "Boyd Ingram bought off or scared off every man we've hired on this job up to now," he stated. "It's only fair to warn you, Dan, that we may well have a tough fight on our hands before we're through!"

Dan straightened to meet Emmet Cooper's steady gaze. A fight against Boyd Ingram—against his own brother! He could never do it. And yet there was no middle road—if he could not side with his brother he had to side against him. And he had accepted Cooper's offer of a job.

"I'm riding for the Cooper brand," he declared, giving full weight to the

cow-country expression. "But I wear no gun!"

Emmet nodded, his gray eyes sober. "I hope we'll have no need for guns." He stood a long moment, gazing off down the dusty street. When he spoke again his voice was low, thoughtful.

"Live by the gun; die by the gun—an old saying. I knew a young feller over at Larkspur. Crazy about guns. Got to be Deputy Sheriff. Died without a chance to fill his hand—"

Dan's throat contracted and he grabbed a two-by-six studding to stop his shaking hand. His stomach churned with sudden memory of the nausea he had known that night

"Who—" he asked, when he could speak "Who killed him?"

"Never found out. They had a bank robbery. Outlaws shot up the town. Nobody else got hurt bad except one of the owlhoots. They caught one—little pale-haired jasper—and strung him up."

Dan slumped on a saw-horse, digging at a sliver in his boot as an excuse to sit down. His knees had gone limber as soaked rawhide.

The Nester. Poor lost devil! And he had to die at the end of a rope. He had been the one harmless member of the crew. Only a poor homesteader who had been burned out, family killed, by warring ranchers. Alone and lost he had thrown in with the Jordys as a last chance, glad of any measure of protection, whatever the job. Now he was dead. And he had only held the horses!

A deep chill settled over Dan as though his blood had stopped in his veins. The Nester had been holding an extra sorrel for him that night in Larkspur. Had the loyal little homesteader held on too long, waiting, watching, hoping—while he, Frank, the youngest of the Jordys, crawled like a sick coyote into the swamp and ran!

Like a blow from the shot-loaded whip came the realization, almost certainly his running away had killed The Nester—his one real friend in the crew, the one man who had taken the time and trouble to teach a curious kid how to read from the handful of books they could find, how to figure arithmetic—book-learning the rest of the Jordys despised and scoffed at.

Dan had brought death to The Nester. Now new friends had taken him in, helped him. What trouble and misfortune would bring upon them?

Wearily, he got to his feet and began nailing the two-by-four braces into place. But in his mind grew a firm decision. He would have to leave Devil's Fork. He'd have to get away soon—before Boyd Ingram found him out. Before Emmet and Elaine had to suffer because of him. He'd go tonight.

But when he and Emmet dragged home that evening, tired and hungry, they found a steaming supper ready. And Elaine had baked a big cake, complete with pink and white frosting.

"Especially for you, Dan!" Elaine cried. "To celebrate your first day as a carpenter!" Little flags of sunny light danced in her gray-green eyes. "Like it?" she asked.

Dan choked up until he couldn't answer. A real, frosting-coated cake! And Elaine had baked it for him. He felt the warmth of blood pounding in his ears. How would he ever tell these people that he was leaving them? When could he make the break?

3

HIS OPPORTUNITY came two days later, but not as he expected. Shortly after Ingram and his gunman had sauntered by for their daily check-up, a lone sandy-whiskered rider drew rein at the gun shop. He finished his business with Kesselman, but instead of leaving, he stood leaning against the hitchrack. After a time he caught Dan's eye and motioned him over.

"Howdy—Frank Jordy!" the rider greeted.

Dan stiffened and his face paled. "You got the wrong dog by the tail!"

"Don't reckon I'm far off!" the man retorted. "I'm Art Blaney. Remember me?"

Dan shook his head. He had no memory of that crafty face.

"If I recall right," the man went on, "Frank Jordy was a hard-ridin' son with cattle savvy. I could use such a feller on my ranch off yonder in the hills. How about it?"

"Can't leave the job I'm on," Dan replied quickly. But the thought crept in—here was a way out of Devil's Fork. And he had to go. Every hour's delay could build up danger.

"Tell the boss your poor old uncle is dyin'," Blaney suggested.

Dan hesitated a moment longer. "Meet you tonight," he said.

•

Supper that evening was a silent meal.

"I suppose you'll be wantin' your pay now," Emmet suggested when they had finished eating.

"No," Dan replied quickly. What he had earned would hardly pay his keep. "I'll be back shortly—soon as I can." How he wished those words were true!

Emmet could no longer control his bitterness. "I suppose Boyd Ingram has made you a good offer—"

"No sir!" Dan countered

"Daddy!" Elaine cried. "Just because other men—"

"Then you're plain scared out!" Emmet declared hotly.

Dan shook his head. He wasn't scared of Ingram. He wasn't scared of anybody except himself. But he had to go, to get far away from anybody who could get hurt. There was no other choice, he told himself. He was running again.

"I sure thank you—" he began. But he couldn't face the look in Elaine's eyes. He hurried out and saddled the little bay mare and rode away into the dusk.

•

"How far off is this ranch of yours?" Dan asked Art Blaney as their two saddle horses plodded on into the deepening night.

Blaney chuckled. "Plenty far. We won't make it tonight. Have to stop in on an old pard of mine—"

They rode through a gate and Dan's ears told him they were approaching buildings, though he could see no light. They were not over five miles from town, he figured, maybe less.

"Maybe your friend is not home," Dan suggested, peering ahead.

Blaney chuckled. "Here's the corral. Turn your nag in."

Their footsteps echoed against the front of a shack, and the whiskered rider stepped ahead and rapped. "It's me," he called. "Art, the Roper!"

Dan started. That name rang a warning bell in his memory. But he couldn't place it. Next instant the door was flung open and Blaney all but shoved him into the lighted room.

"Hey, Bull-Nose!" the rider crowed. "Look who I brung yuh!" He crackled with laughter. "I fed him a quick story about needin' a ranch hand, and he swallered it like a starvin' pup!"

"Frank Jordy!" a heavy voice roared. "Well, damn my eyes!"

Dan whirled and saw for the first time the squat, beefy man who stood in a shaded corner, gun in hand. Dan's throat constricted in sudden real fear. Bull-Nose—the one outlaw who had ever crossed the Jordy crew and lived.

"Found him working on a church in town," Blaney went on. "Figured at first I must of had one too many of Ingram's painkillers. But it's him all right—Frank Jordy."

"Yep, it's him!" Bull-Nose hol-

stered his gun and rubbed his big hands together. "This is better than I ever hoped for!"

DAN CAST a quick look around him. The door had banged shut again. The three little windows in the shack were boarded over and blanketed to keep in the light from a single kerosene lamp. There was only one room, no way out. And both men watched him.

Bull-Nose and Art, the Roper. Bull-Nose had joined the Jordy crew once. He had lasted only a few weeks and Sime had run him out. He should have killed Bull-Nose then. They all knew it. But the beefy outlaw had saved Val's drunken life. Sime wouldn't gun him down.

It had been a mistake. Bull-Nose came back with Art, the Roper when Sime was away and shot it out with Matt, leaving him with a forty-five slug in the chest. Matt got well, and Dan had forgotten Art, the Roper. He could never forget Bull-Nose.

"I've quit the crew," Dan said quietly. "Couple months ago."

Bull-Nose chuckled in his throat. "So I heard. The night they stretched The Nester to a cottonwoood limb. So maybe I better wise you up on what's doin'." He rubbed his hands together again.

"First off," he stated, "Kansas City Jack got sore at Sime because he wouldn't send after you and drag you back. And you know that big knife of Jack's? He shoved it through Sime's ribs 'til he had that big Jordy boy pinned to a log wall!"

Dan was suddenly sick again, his knees rubbery. Sime, too, had died because he ran away. Good old Sime! He had been the planner of the crew, the strict general who kept the rest in line, kept all but Val and Heck away from the towns, away from other outlaw hangouts. Sime had been the real leader of the outfit since old Matt had picked up too many buckshot to be quick with a gun. They couldn't last without Sime.

"Did he—" Dan asked, his voice husky. "Did Jack get—"

Bull-Nose grinned, an ugly twisting of his broad face. "Old Matt put three slugs into that knifer's belly, but not before Sime had coughed up his lungs."

Dan swallowed through a tight throat. That left only Val and Heck and Matt—

"Yep!" Bull-Nose echoed his thoughts. "Val and Heck—and stove-up ol' Matt. So me and Art will be driftin' over to join up. They'll be needin' me about now."

"Matt will gut-shoot you on sight!" Dan gritted.

"Not this time!" Bull-Nose replied, chuckling. "Val is boss. And me and Val are pards. I'll be runnin' the crew in a week."

He spoke the truth, Dan realized sickly. Val couldn't stay sober a week. It would go hard with Matt.

Bull-Nose looked Dan up and down. "So we'll be takin' you along back with us. We'll need another Jordy—"

"No dice!" Dan replied quickly. "I'm through!"

Bull-Nose looked Dan up and "Maybe," he choked, "you don't savvy who's boss!" He nodded to Art, and the rider stepped behind Dan. Before Dan could figure the move, he found his arms pinned. Then Bull-Nose hit him a wicked blow on the side of the head.

FOR AN INSTANT Dan slumped. Then he caught himself. He jerked loose from Art and whirled and swung. He caught the rider full in the face and dumped him to the floor. He twisted back and aimed a punch with all his strength at Bull-Nose's grinning mouth. But he ran head-on into the big outlaw's hard fist and the next instant he felt his own head strike the floor.

The room spun dizzily. He could barely make out Bull-Nose's heavy movement, a vicious kick aimed at his ribs. With an instinct born of form above him. Then he saw the

rough and tumble scraps in the Jordy camp, Dan writhed aside and caught the big outlaw's boot and twisted it hard over.

Bull-Nose crashed to the floor, and Dan was up, dodging for the door. He had only a glimpse of Art swinging a chair leg. He ducked, but the club grazed his head, and his skull rang with a hundred bells. Then Bull-Nose hit him again, and he fell—down, down, down, into utter blackness.

Dan came back to life with a dash of cold water in his face. He tried to dodge, but he couldn't move. It took him several minutes to find that his wrists were tied up to pegs in the cabin wall, tied with rawhide, and the pegs were high and far apart. Only by stretching could he reach the floor with his toes.

Bull-Nose taunted him. "Ready to come along peaceable—"

Dan shook his head. Bull-Nose hit him in the stomach, and once more the light went out.

Next time it was the same. How many times they drenched him with water and questioned him, he lost count.

Finally he opened his eyes to find complete darkness. He thought he had gone blind until he saw a crack of light under the door. It was daylight outside. They had left him for dead.

An hour later he was at last fully conscious. Every muscle and bone in his body ached and throbbed. But he couldn't hang there, he knew. He'd starve to death and nobody would ever know.

Painfully, he tried to break away. It was useless. His wrists and hands were numb as pickled beef. But his legs could still move. With more strength than he knew he had, he swung his body sideways and kicked up at the peg—and blacked out.

When his senses returned he tried again. Then again. At last he felt the peg give away and he fell.

A long time later he came to, realized that he still hung by one arm. A half-hour's patient, clumsy work and he pulled free. The door was bolted on the outside, so he kicked out a window and crawled through to fall, cut and bleeding, on the ground outside.

•

It was there that Elaine found him just at dusk. He never knew how he managed to get straddle of the little pinto pony that Elaine brought, how he managed to hang on while she walked and led the pinto home. He new nothing until he opened his eyes the next morning and looked up at Elaine's anxious face and at her soft ringlets of red-gold hair.

For an instant he remembered a verse from the Bible that The Nester had read, and he thought he looked at an Angel. Then Elaine spoke. With a start Dan tried to get up.

"Oh, no!" Elaine cried. "Please don't try to move!"

He settled back with a stifled groan. His wrists, he found, were bandaged. And so was his face and head. He was sore all over and weak, too weak to lift an arm. He cursed under his breath. He was helpless as a sick calf in a bog hole!

And he had brought trouble to Elaine and her father.

"Why—" he begged. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Hush!" Elaine whispered, the shine of tears in her eyes. "You must rest!"

Dan turned his face to the wall. He dared not look into her eyes again. He would break down, he felt sure. He'd most likely blurt out the whole story, why he had come to Devil's Fork, why he had to get away again before he brought misfortune to the Coopers as he had brought trouble and death to the others. He couldn't see Elaine hurt. She had been so good to him, and even having her near made his pulse hammer like the drums of an Indian sun-dance.

For her sake he had to go. If only his strength hadn't failed him outside the shack—

He closed his eyes and pretended sleep. In his utter exhaustion, the sleep quickly became real, and the room was warm with noonday sun when he wakened again.

●

ELAINE held a steaming bowl of broth and he drank through bruised and swollen lips. His stomach churned, but the warmth stirred his blood.

"Where—" he asked. "How did you find me?"

Elaine smiled self-consciously. "Outside the window of an abandoned shack. I knew by the look in your eyes when you rode away from here you were in trouble. I waited as long as I could. I knew something must have happened and I rode out to look for you—"

"And you brought me back here. I'm sure obliged to you, Elaine. I don't know how you managed, but—"

"I had to get you home where I could look after you. You were so terribly beaten and hurt. And I was afraid whoever had done such things to you would come back. I had to—"

"But, why—""

"Oh, Dan!" There were tears in Elaine's gray-green eyes again, and a brightness shining through. "Dan—surely you know how I feel. It's foolish for me to try to hide it. Only I—I hoped maybe you cared, too—"

Dan's throat swelled until the words were scarcely audible. "Elaine—I'm—my grandmother was a Blackfoot squaw!" Maybe, he thought desperately, she would understand. Maybe she'd take that as a reason why they should not care for each other. He could never tell her that he had been an outlaw, that his family was composed of the lowest dregs of the range, that he could bring her nothing but trouble and shame—

"Dan!" Elaine whispered. "My mother was part Cherokee! Don't you see—"

Dan looked up into her eyes and suddenly he was trying to raise his arms. He managed one part way. Then she was on her knees beside him and cradled his bandaged head in tender hands while her warm lips pressed softly down on his.

●

The next few days were, for Dan, a troubled mixture of wonder and happiness and deep despair. Such a feeling of exultation he had never known as he held Elaine in his arms. And yet deep inside he cursed himself for a weakling. Sooner or later, he felt sure, he would bring certain disaster to Elaine and her father, and the blame would rest entirely on him. Yet he could figure no way out.

His strength returned quickly. In spite of Elaine's protests, he was soon up and about. He had lost a lot of blood, she reminded him, both from the head-beating in the cabin and later from glass-cuts as he plunged through the window after he had managed to kick off the nailed boards. But youth and health responded to her tender care, and Dan soon became restless. He had to be doing something, he felt, yet he dreaded to go into the town. Boyd Ingram, or somebody, might recognize him.

And his wrists were a constant source of anxiety. They were slowest to heal, and his hands remained useless, misshapen things that he tried to hide even from himself.

Emmet greeted Dan each morning and evening with cheering words and the latest news of the town, with no

trace of the bitterness he had shown when Dan had ridden away.

"Boyd Ingram is gettin' tougher by the hour," he reported one evening. "This has been a good season all around for the ranchers. They're payin' off hay hands and riders in good cash money for a change—and no stalling 'til after roundup. More money in the Cattlemen's Bank than ever before for this time of the year. And plenty of folks in town spending their roll."

He shook his head worriedly. "I reckon Ingram can't stand to see any of that cash get away. Claims if he had his new hall built he could handle more customers, keep the boys happy. What I reckon he means is, if he had his hall built he'd clean up fast, make his roll while the gettin' was good!"

SUNDAY came, but Dan would not leave the house. While Emmet and Elaine went to church, he sat in the kitchen soaking his hands, rubbing his wrists until the newly-healed skin threatened to break open again. Slowly he was noticing improvement.

Elaine hurried home to fix a good Sunday dinner and bring bits of news, outstanding parts of the sermon, latest reports on the church building. There had been an offer, the minister had said, on the part of a local saloon man, that meant Boyd Ingram, an offer of five hundred dollars toward the church, if the carpenters would promise to stop all work for a month and finish a little job for him first.

"Five hundred dollars!" Elaine scoffed. "No wonder; If Boyd Ingram had his chance he could steal twice that much from the poor cowhands in a month!"

"Will the minister deal with him?" Dan asked.

Elaine laughed and her eyes shone with excitement. "He doesn't have to! He told us just this morning, the most wonderful thing happened. Somebody, nobody knows who, put a whole money-belt packed full of bills into the collection plate a couple of weeks ago. So he could tell Boyd Ingram to go pick buttercups!"

Dan nodded and went to stare out the window, the cold chill settling again on his shoulders. The church had needed the money. They might have dealt with Ingram, settled with him peacefully. But now they didn't have to. And Ingram wouldn't back down. It would mean a fight. The money, the same blood-tainted, dirty money he had thought to turn to good might now cause still further trouble and bloodshed. There was no denying it—a Jordy could never do right!

4

DAY BY DAY the building progressed slowly, with only Emmet Cooper working and occasionally a volunteer helper from among the merchants. They, too, were rushed with business.

Dan could stand it no longer. "If you'll put up with my clumsiness." he said, spreading his swollen hands, "I'd like to get back on the job!"

Emmet grinned. "Boy—if you can't more'n hold up one end of a board, you'll be mighty welcome. I sure need you!"

At first the work was torture, hammering impossible. But with constant use, Dan's wrists mended faster, grew stronger. In a week the swelling had gone and his right hand was near normal. His left still ached and throbbed with too much use.

They had almost forgotten Ingram. He never came near the building any more. He could even have been out of town. For once Dan thought his worry might have been for nothing.

Then in the early, darkest hours of one morning came the cry of fire. The new church was on fire!

Emmet and Dan raced through town side by side, still buckling belts and buttoning shirts as they ran. But the fire had already been brought under control by the closer neighbors. It had burned only a part of the stack of new wainscoting lumber for the interior of the church.

"It was done deliberate!" Alex, the barber, yelled. "Smell that kerosene!"

The smell was plain enough on the clear night air. Kerosene had been poured along one side of the pile. Although the lumber had been green and had only burned where it was kindled, the flame and smoke had ruined the rest. Work would be held up. Valuable property had been destroyed.

"Boyd Ingram!" somebody yelled. "Make him pay for it!"

"Hold on!" Emmet called. "You can't go accusing anybody of this without proof—no matter who it might be!"

"That's right," Barney Horton, the town marshal, put in. "Got no right to call names without you got proof."

"Reckon we got proof," Job Hyatt, the stableman, declared, crowding up to the marshal. "I saw Slim Romas' horse standin' ground-hitched back of the church less than five minutes before somebody hollered 'Fire!'"

"Yeah!" Kesselman, the gun shop owner, agreed. "Looks like you got yourself a chore, Marshal. Better go talk to Boyd Ingram. Bein' a friend of his, you shouldn't ought to be scared of him!"

A chorus of growls echoed Kesselman's words. The marshal glowered around at the crowd and then strode off in the direction of Ingram's glittering *Palace*.

The crowd gathered until it filled the street, many of the men with nightshirts tucked into Levis, but with guns buckled on. They shifted about, restless, waiting. Pale dawn light began to push back the shadows and neighbor recognized neighbor in the crowd. Talk turned more and more to Boyd Ingram.

AT LAST Marshal Barney Horton returned from the *Palace*. He had routed Boyd out of bed in his sleeping quarters back of the saloon, he told them. Boyd knew nothing about the fire. Slim Romas, his right hand man, had been out of town since Tuesday.

"That's a lie!" Bob Tyler, the grocer, yelled. "Slim bought chewin' tobacco from me yesterday mornin'!"

"I saw his horse—" the stableman repeated. "Not an hour ago!"

"Met Slim Romas riding south," a cowhand reported, "as I was pullin' into town about a half-hour ago with that stock for the butcher. He was makin' far-apart tracks on that bay gelding—"

"There's your duty!" Hyatt yelled at the marshal. "Arrest Boyd Ingram. Romas don't even blow his nose without Boyd's say-so!"

The marshal looked around the crowd with haggard face. "The way I see my duty," he declared, "is to arrest the man that done the job. If you claim it was Romas—I'm goin' after Romas." He strode hurriedly away in the direction of the stable.

"Yah!" yelled Alex, the barber. "He goes after Romas, and the two of 'em keep right on goin'. That's what we get for havin' a marshal who is a friend of Boyd Ingram!"

"The barber is right, Dan," Emmet pointed out. "Did you see Barney's face? He'll never come back to this town. He wouldn't dare tackle Ingram."

"What's our next move?" Dan asked. "Go get a bite of breakfast and back to work?" Maybe, he figured, if they started home it would help break up the crowd. He had been standing

close beside Emmet, his face in shadow, watching, and he could feel the mob violence building up. It showed in the men's faces, in the tone of their words, in their every action. It sent a chill through his blood and his hands began to ache with tension.

"I reckon," Emmet agreed seriously, "that we should head for home. Though I don't favor lettin' Boyd Ingram get away—"

Kesselman's loud voice cut in: "If the rest of you fellers are with me, go get your guns and we'll meet in front of my shop. Anybody without a gun, I'll lend him one!"

Emmet looked at Dan. "I'm afraid this is it. Ingram had double-crossed most every man in town at some time or other. This time they are all riled up at once. But don't you mix in it. Whatever your reason for not wearing a gun—that's your business and nobody else's. And your hands are still sore."

Dan nodded to Emmet and edged away, the old feeling of nausea rising in him. Death hung in the air, death for his own brother. If only he could have been far away from Devil's Fork!

He crossed the plank sidewalk and leaned against the wall of the gun shop, suddenly weak and shaky inside. Some of the men were scattering, going after their weapons. Emmet Cooper had hurried down the street. Other men, already armed, crowded in a knot, shuffling their boots in the dust. Soon they would all be back, talking, yelling, building up their courage.

Maybe they would jam into the nearest saloon for a round of drinks to drown all caution. Or maybe this would be a sober mob, grim and deadly. But it would still be an unthinking mob.

Dan had seen mob action before. Once a maddened crowd of townsmen had cornered an old homesteader in his shack, blaming the poor devil for one of Val Jordy's drunken killings. They had riddled the shack with lead and set it afire. The old homesteader never came out.

And now a mob would take Boyd Ingram. Maybe the man was guilty. Maybe not. Either way, he had no chance. True, the marshal had talked to him. Or had he dared to state the real purpose of his visit? There had been little courage showing in Barney Horton's face. The mob action might still come as a surprise to Ingram.

Dan shivered as he caught sight of the men returning with guns in their hands. It wasn't right—it couldn't go on, no matter who the victim! Somebody had to get to Ingram, to warn him, to get him under the protection of the law. But with the marshal gone, there was no law...

DAN STARTED walking down the planks. Nobody stopped him. At the corner he turned toward the *Palace*. Men joining the mob stopped in their tracks. They talked in low voices to each other. But nobody raised a cry. Nobody called after him.

That was the way with mobs, Dan realized. Once let the planning drop to a whisper, then each man waited for the next to raise the first shout, to fire the shot that would start them off. If they would only wait long enough—

The gold-backed window panes of the *Palace* glittered like evil fires in the breaking dawn-light. Dan strode past the empty hitch-rail and up across the wide gallery, his bootheels striking hollow echoes from the slivered planks. He pushed open the bat-wings and stepped inside.

The place was dim and foul-smelling and empty. Hardly pausing, Dan strode on past the end of the bar and into the big back room. Boyd

Ingram had just stepped from the door of his living quarters, gun in hand. Dan threaded his way past the chairs and tables to reach him.

"I had to warn you," he said quickly. "There's a mob—"

Boyd stared at him. "You're that cowhand-carpenter, the jughead that wouldn't talk business!"

"Never mind that, Floyd. There's a mob coming—"

"Floyd? Mister, the name is—"

"Floyd Jordy! Don't you know me? I'm Frank—" Floyd looked a lot like Heck Jordy, Dan decided. Big and tough and mean, with a streak of brute stubbornness. "You remember—"

"Little Frank? The runt? I heard you'd run off—"

Dan squared his shoulders. He might be thinner than his brothers, but he was within an inch as tall, taller than average.

"Floyd, I couldn't let any brother of mine get—"

"Haul out of here!" Floyd roared. "Devil take the mob! I can bluff any mob and I'll still show 'em who's boss in Devil's Fork! Get out before I use my boots on you!"

Dan held his ground. "You don't know this mob, Floyd—"

"Get out!" the saloonman yelled. "You—my *brother!* Ha! I wouldn't own you for a brother—you renegade!" He swung his boot in a vicious kick aimed at Dan's groin.

Dan flattened back against the wall, but the boot toe caught him in the stomach. He doubled up, momentarily paralyzed. He saw Floyd raise his gun to bring the barrel down across his skull, but he couldn't move. He set his teeth and shut his eyes.

A SHOT BOOMED loudly in the hollow room. Dan jerked to attention in time to see the gun spill from Floyd's limp hand. Then the saloonman dove past him and through the open door into his private office. Emmet Cooper stood across the room, six-gun gripped in his right hand.

"Come on, Dan," he called. "Get into the clear. That lobo is not finished yet. I winged his right hand, but he's just as clever with his left!"

Dan leaned against the wall, fighting to get his breath, while armed men crowded through the other door into the room, half-filling the space. Kesselman stepped past Emmet.

"Come out of there, Ingram!" Kesselman ordered. "With your hands high. We'll give you a fair trial!"

"Ha!" the saloonman roared from the protection of his office. "I'll be comin' out! I'll count ten and come out a-shootin'. I can down four or five of you before you get me! One, two—"

The men backed up, recognizing the truth of Ingram's boast. They were all brave enough. But none wanted to die this morning. A little pile of burned lumber wasn't enough to die for, and they had forgotten previous quarrels with Boyd Ingram. This sudden turn was more than they had bargained for.

"Three—four—five—six—" Ingram's voice held a wild taunt and he deliberately speeded up his counting.

Men jammed in the doorway, crowded from beyond by more men pushing in from the street through the barroom. A dozen still remained in the back room, and the seconds were going fast.

Dan saw the situation at a glance. Stubborn Floyd Jordy, or Boyd Ingram, would cut loose at the count of ten. Men would die, trapped. Good, hard-working, decent men who had come into this mob thinking they were doing the only right thing. Floyd would kill and laugh—and he might even win!

"Seven—eight—" Floyd was yelling the numbers, jeering.

Dan stared at the gun by his feet. At the count of eight he ducked down and scooped it up with his right hand, his good right hand. With one jump, he reached the office door.

Floyd's shot came too quick, too

hurried. It splintered the door frame, threw a shower of slivers in Dan's face, and glanced past his head. Then Dan fired. The gun felt strange in his hand, light-weight, and he pulled too low, took Floyd low in the stomach. Quick as he could thumb the hammer, he fired two more shots, and the range was deadly close. Floyd managed to trigger his own weapon only once more before he fell. The bullet tore up the floor between Dan's boots.

All at once the crowd surged around him, slapping him on the back, trying to shake his hand. And he had shot down his own brother! He started to throw the gun away, but instinct stronger than will made him tuck it into his belt.

HE PUSHED through the mob then, out into the street, heedless of their calls and their wild praise. He had shot Floyd Jordy. He started walking down the street, anywhere to be away.

But the self-loathing, the nausea he expected, did not come. Only sorrow. It was as though he had found a crippled horse, a horse he had long known, and he had been forced to fire the fatal shot, to end the animal's misery. It was inevitable.

He pulled out the gun he had used. It was a new Smith and Wesson thirty-eight, double-action. Little wonder it had felt odd in his hand after the old Frontier Model he had used so long. And he had thumbed the hammer on this gun!

Stepping into an alley, he removed the remaining cartridges and tried the mechanism. It was smooth, fast—fast as he could work the long-trigger-pull. He had to admit a thrill of admiration. Here was a weapon!

But of what use was it to him? Wearily, he thrust it back into his belt. He had to decide on the next move. He could hardly stay in Devil's Fork. But what about Elaine? How could he explain to her? He walked far out around the town, to be sure that Emmet would be home ahead of him. He could never answer all Elaine's questions about this morning's work alone.

HE FOUND Emmet waiting for him. And with the carpenter were Kesselman, Bob Tyler, Eric Sandstrom, Alex, Job Hyatt, and Casey Moore—all trying to speak at once.

Emmet pushed ahead to meet Dan. "Son," he said, eyeing the gun in Dan's belt, "you couldn't have picked up that gun for a better cause! Now these boys want to ask a favor—"

"Barney Horton left this," Hyatt called, holding up the marshal's nickel-plated badge. "Threw it in my oat-bin!"

"He never went after Slim Romas a-tall," Alex explained. "Batch Higgins saw him high-tailin' for yonder mountains!"

"We're makin' you Marshal of Devil's Fork!" Kesselman declared. "High time we had a marshal with guts!"

"Yes, indeed," Eric Sandstrom, the banker, put in. "With my bank vault loaded to the doors, I haven't been able to sleep nights for a month—"

Dan stood with his feet braced apart and a shudder ran through him at mention of the bank. He wanted no part of it.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I can't oblige you. You need an older man for the job."

"Nonsense!" Kesselman retorted. "A young man can out-fight an older feller any old time. We need a young man with guts and a steady hand. And that's you! Here—" He grabbed the nickel badge from Job Hyatt's hand and quickly pinned it on Dan's shirt.

"And here's a holster I brought from the shop to fit your gun. The outfit is yours for keeps. Just wear it!"

When the men had gone, Dan unpinned the badge and put it in his shirt pocket. He laid the gun and holster on the shelf above his bed, drank two cups of coffee and went back up the street to the building job. Elaine, reading something too deep for words in the expression of his face, let him go with only an understanding smile and a light touch of her hand on his in parting.

Dan found a curious crowd around the buried lumber. The excitement had aroused interest in the building and a number of men offered to help with the work. They pitched in and the sawdust flew. The undertaker came by, and the blacksmith and a couple of saloon swampers, and they all volunteered as carpenters as soon as they had cleaned up the mess down at the *Palace*.

Dan tried not to think of that back room at the *Palace*. He bent to his work and put all else from his mind. Maybe, he thought, with the work going along smoothly, quietly, for a few days, he could find himself. He might finally decide what he should do.

5

BUT THE work could not go along quietly for even one day. By mid-afternoon came the rumor that outlaws were seen in the neighborhood. Just who had seen them, nobody ventured to say. But the rumor grew and worried frowns wrinkled the merchants' brows. There was too much loose money in town.

Before dusk rumor had it that no less than the Jordy crew was camped nearby waiting for night. And banker Sandstrom paced the sidewalk.

"You got to do something!" he declared, stopping Dan and Emmet on their way home.

Dan shook his head. "It's only talk."

"Where there's smoke," the banker countered, "there's Injuns, I always say. That Jordy outfit must be around, or how did the talk get started?"

"How does any talk get started?" Dan crowded past the banker and started on. "Somebody's been bending the elbow too much!" It was only some drunken cowhand's story, he told himself. But the badge in his pocket burned like a red-hot horseshoe fresh from the forge. The more he let himself think about it, the more desperate he became. How could he be expected to rod the law in this town against his own people!

"Everybody in town seems to be expecting trouble from the Jordy crew tonight," Emmet remarked as they neared home.

Dan glanced up at the moon, already halfway across the sky. "They wouldn't strike tonight," he declared, remembering Matt Jordy's preference for working under a full moon. But Bull-Nose might be heading the crew, he remembered too. And if they came, he, one of the Jordys, would be expected to fight, to shoot down his own brothers even as he had shot Floyd. The pain was greater than Floyd's wild kick in the stomach!

Dan sat down to the supper table, but Elaine's good cooking turned dry as dust in his mouth. He was almost glad when Sandstrom and Kesselman came to interrupt the meal.

They wanted to place a guard around the bank, and Emmet volunteered for duty until two in the morning. Reluctantly, Dan agreed to take over from then on. The banker himself would stay until Kesselman and Alex came on at midnight.

"No hard feelings, I hope, Dan," Kesselman remarked, "that we're going ahead with plans to post a guard. Can't expect one lone marshal

to protect the town in this kind of emergency."

Dan shook his head. "I'll be glad to have your help."

"At midnight," Elaine offered, "I'll bring hot coffee and doughnuts for all the men on guard duty."

"Nothing doing!" they all protested. "Not safe on the street!"

Elaine laughed. "Nobody's going to hurt me. And you'll be plenty glad for something hot to drink by midnight!"

THE MEN left, and Dan picked up his gun and holster and walked part way with them. He was afraid, he had to admit, to stay and talk to Elaine, afraid of what he might say. His thoughts were too tangled and overflowing. He had to get by himself, to weigh and think things out.

He strode alone down past the livery stable. Dusk had deepened into night and the stars were coming into place in the darkening sky. The moon had moved well across toward the mountains. It would be going down around midnight, he figured. It would be a clumsy night for a robbery. But Bull-Nose might be a clumsy leader.

The stableman had promised to keep a horse ready for his use as town marshal. Since Bull-Nose and Art, the Roper, had taken his own little bay mare, he might need a horse. And what better time than now to take a ride? The fresh night air might clear his brain, help him to think.

He found the horse, a long-legged buckskin, and saddled up. Taking the badge from his shirt pocket, he held it a long time in the palm of his hand, letting the lantern light reflect from its polished surface. Maybe he, too, should toss it into the oat-bin. It could only mean trouble and bloodshed if he kept it. But it was a law badge. He, a Jordy, had been trusted with a law badge. Carefully, he slipped it back into his pocket. He blew out the lantern and hung it up where Hyatt could find it when he came back from supper and led his horse out into the night.

At first he could see nothing, and let the horse follow its own inclination. But at the lower end of the side-street, close by the lumber yard, he caught movement and reined up. Hunching low, he made out two riders silhouetted against the lighter wall of the lumber yard, and his heart hammered wildly against his ribs. They were Bull-Nose and Art, the Roper!

The Jordy crew *had* come to town! The rumor was right!

But it was too early for a raid. These two would be looking over the ground. The rest would be holed up somewhere, likely in the old abandoned shack. Val and Heck and Matt. Good old Matt. If he could know what a set-up he was running into—

Abruptly, Dan knew where his allegiance lay. The ties of family came first. True, he had sided with the town, and he would never again join in a raid with the Jordys. But neither could he see Val and Heck and Matt, especially good old Matt, ride into a trap that meant sure death. And he could never join the guards who would be shooting the Jordys down!

Without hesitation, he reined away toward the abandoned shack.

●

Again there was no light showing. But by the faint moonlight Dan found the gate and the corral. He knocked softly on the door or the shack. It was jerked open by Val himself, gun in hand.

"I'll be a sidewinder's granny!" he yelled. "It's our little *brother,* Frank! Step inside, you renegade coyote!" He jammed his gun muzzle into Dan's stomach. "Grab his iron, Heck. You been needin' a new one to replace that old thumb-buster of yours!"

Dan was half-dragged into the light. "Hold on," he protested. "I came to warn you boys of a trap—"

"Ha!" Heck laughed, examining the gun he took from Dan's holster. "He came to warn us, Val—so we can run—"

Val holstered his gun and jerked a thumb toward the far side of the room. "Meet Slim Romas—our new pard!"

Dan glanced around quickly. It *was* Romas, smooth and dark as ever. The man grinned crookedly. "Hello—carpenter!"

"This pleasant chat could go on all night," Val remarked, looking Dan over with his mud-brown eyes. "But we've got chores waitin'. We'll just leave you here 'til we're through. When we pass the word around—and they find you missing in town, you'll be damned glad to come back and work with us!"

Dan shook his head. "I can't, Val—no matter what—"

"Yes you can," Heck growled, "little *brother*—" He grabbed Dan's arms from behind. Dan jerked and fought, but Heck's grip held. And Val swung hard to strike him full on the jaw.

WHEN HE came back to consciousness, he found himself full-length on the floor, his wrists bound behind his back, his ankles tied. He was powerless to move. Despair settled on him like a leaden weight. Now he was finished.

By the lamp that still burned in the wall bracket, he could see around the empty room. He was alone. But the door stood ajar. Listening intently, he caught footsteps. Maybe—but it was no use. It was he who had walked into a trap!

Then the door was pushed open and Matt Jordy stood looking down at him. The head of the Jordy clan looked older, grayer, more haggard than Dan had ever seen him. He was but the ghost of the big Matt Jordy who had led a wild-eyed outlaw band up and down the West. He was the deposed leader, the oldster who had been left behind. Dan felt sudden pity for this man.

"Howdy, Matt," he said quietly, lying still on the floor.

"Howdy, Frank," Matt replied. He hunkered down beside Dan and rolled him half over. "Steady, Boy—" With a whisk of his pocket knife he slashed the bonds that tied Dan's wrists and ankles. "I've missed you around camp, Frank."

Slowly, groggily, Dan came to his feet. "I've missed *you,* Matt," he said earnestly. He had never called him "Dad" or "Father." It wouldn't have seemed right. "Matt," he asked, "are they givin' you a square deal?"

The older man rubbed his rough hand across his eyes. "I'll make out. But you—" He glanced around at the open door. "Boy, you better head over the hill—and keep on ridin'!"

Dan slowly shook his head. He pulled the nickel badge from his shirt pocket, polished it on his sleeve and carefully pinned it on. "I wasn't sure about this until a few minutes ago—"

Matt stared at the badge. "They'll gun you down in your tracks!" he warned.

Dan had no answer. His belt and holster were gone, he discovered, as well as his gun. He was a lawman without a weapon. He glanced up to meet Matt's steady gaze and surprised an odd look in the older man's eyes, a spark of pride or memory, or maybe a picture out of Matt's own dreams, a thought of what might have been.

It passed in an instant, and Matt dropped his gaze. With trembling fin-

gers he unbuckled his gun belt and passed it over to Dan. "I can get another from Val," he said lightly.

Dan's throat choked up and he could find no words. He buckled the heavy belt around his own lean hips, the old, single-action Frontier Colt that Matt had always carried, its dark wooden grip worn smooth to the touch of his hand.

"Matt," he said huskily. "You won't be in town—"

"You and me won't swap lead. I promise you that." Matt stuck out his hand. "Good luck, Boy!"

"Thanks, Matt!" Dan whispered, gripping the gnarled hand. Eyes blurred, he turned and hurried out the door.

HE FOUND his buckskin horse waiting at the corral and he threw himself into the saddle and reined away into the dim moon-glow, heading for town. But the blow he had taken from Val had jolted him deeper than he realized. Now the pounding jar of his ride set his head to spinning crazily. He reeled in the saddle, blind to familiar landmarks.

Twice he blundered on water tanks where windmills creaked and cattle came to drink. Each time he stopped to plunge his head in the cold water. At last his vision cleared, and he found the moon well down in the west. Precious time had slipped by, and he was still miles from town.

By the time he sighted the first buildings of Devil's Fork, the moon was nearly gone. But his head had cleared. He checked the loads in the old six-gun and spurred headlong for the main street.

He could make out Cooper's frame house, a light in the window, and other houses clustered beyond. But even before he drew close, the door of the carpenter's house swung open and lamplight spilled out. In the short moment before it closed, he saw Elaine with a basket on her arm, her trim figure silhouetted against the yellow glow of the lamp. She was starting out with hot coffee and lunch for Emmet and the rest of the bank guards.

Dan hauled the buckskin to a plunging stop. If he rode wildly in on the main street, some of the outlaw crew would be sure to cut loose at him. And the bullets would strike Elaine. He was too far away to call to her, to warn her back.

Desperately he reined around and spurred for the side street that ran past the lumber yard. He had to swing in from there—and he had to do it fast, before Elaine could get near the bank.

He circled past the livery stable's corrals and instinctively his eyes began to search out the shadows, to seek the flicker of movement that told of a gunman set to block the street—even as he had once blocked off dusty cow-town streets for the Jordy crew.

He spotted Heck Jordy's big, gangling frame even before the outlaw lifted his gun. Dan's weapon leaped up in his hand, but still he held his fire. He let Heck get in the first shot, and the bullet burned the skin of his neck as it tore through his shirt collar. Then Dan's gun roared, and he choked out a sob as he saw Heck stagger and sprawl into the dust. He had always been able to out-shoot big, stubborn Heck Jordy!

But there was no time for sorrow. Both Val and Bull-Nose cut loose at him from the shadows farther up the street. Dan knew a second's triumph. He had jumped them before they reached the bank! He had made it in time!

But his horse was carrying him right into their range. He reined aside and jumped from the saddle just as the animal squealed and stampeded, pitching wildly, crazed by a bullet burn.

DAN HIT the ground with a jolt that knocked him dizzy and he staggered into the shade of the lumber yard wall. Val's bullets were still

reaching for him, cutting slivers from the planks, ripping into the wall. Dan steadied himself and swung up his gun. At the next muzzle flash he slammed his bullet home.

He heard Val's choking screams as he fell. The man was hit hard. But he triggered one more shot before he went out, and the bullet slapped Dan across the ribs like the kick of a locoed mule. Dan fell to his knees, then staggered up and ran on. An inch closer, he realized, and they could have counted *him* out!

Val Jordy was dead by the time Dan reached him, and Dan could look at the body with no pain of conscience. There had been nothing but bad blood between them. Of the Jordys, Val had meant no more to Dan than an outsider, no more than Bull-Nose or any drunken saddle-bum.

With a start Dan remembered the big, swaggering outlaw, Bull-Nose, and he jerked up his gun. But the shadows were empty. Bull-Nose had run out on Val, left him to face death alone. Dan started for the corner of the lumber yard, but the hammer of bootheels in the alley told him the big, beefy long-rider had already covered a good distance toward the next street.

Before he could follow, the rattle of gunfire echoed from the bank corner, and the thin tinkle of breaking glass. Then he heard Elaine's scream.

Dan dove for the street and ran headlong up through the last rays of moonlight, heedless of his own danger. Halfway to the bank he bumped into Art, the Roper, and beat the surprised outlaw to the shot. He gunned the man down in the street and ran on. Elaine was in trouble!

He heard Emmet's gun speak from the shadow of the bank, and Kesselman and Alex were both yelling and shooting from up the street. Then Emmet called out a warning and the shooting stopped. In the crisp silence Dan heard half a hundred voices coming to life in all corners of the town, excited, anxious townspeople, shocked suddenly awake.

The moon was gone and darkness claimed the street. Dan called to Emmet as he reached the corner. He nearly stumbled over two bodies in the dust.

Then he caught sight of Elaine. He had only a glimpse of her silhouette against the light in the hotel lobby across the street, but one look was enough to show him the thin, slick-haired figure of Slim Romas, the former Boyd Ingram man, pulling Elaine in front of him for a shield.

Dan closed the last of the distance at a headlong run. Almost upon the man, instinct made him jump aside just as Elaine screamed, "Dan! No—"

The blast of Romas' gun scorched Dan's face, but he saw Elaine throw herself down, tearing away from the outlaw's grip. Dan swung his gun barrel hard against Romas' sleek head.

The man crumpled, and Dan swung around to catch Elaine, holstering his gun as he turned. But behind him he heard again the click of Romas' weapon. Then almost at his shoulder, Emmet yelled and fired. Dan knew without turning that Slim Romas had made his last play.

"Elaine!" Dan called, his voice hoarse with anxiety as he helped her up from the ground. "Elaine! Did he—are you hurt?"

"I'm all right, Dan," the girl replied shakily, leaning into his arms. "But you—" She felt the side of his shirt. "Dan—you've been hit! Quick! Let me—"

"It's nothing," Dan countered, pulling away. "I've still got a chore; something I have to know." A numb-

ing chill crept over him with a new realization. The fight was over. The Jordy crew had been finished. But what of Matt Jordy, tired old Matt who had given up his gun?

DAN GRABBED a lantern from one of the arriving townsmen and hurried to look at the two bodies he had stumbled over. If one of them turned out to be Matt Jordy—

But both were strangers, outlaws new to this range. Dan took another breath. Maybe Matt *had* stayed away from town.

But Alex shouted across to Emmet, "I heard more shootin' on down that-a-way while we swapped lead with these jiggers." He waved his arm toward the mercantile.

With tight throat, Dan headed down the street. Bull-Nose could have come this way, he reasoned, out of the alley. Some man from town could have traded shots with him.

But the lantern light picked up a heavy bulk in the dust of the street. It was Bull-Nose himself—dead. And only a short distance away sprawled a lanky figure that had to be Matt Jordy. Matt had settled his score with the beefy gunman.

"You got the dirty sidewinder, Matt!" Dan whispered, dropping down beside the the elder Jordy. "You finished him, Matt!" Tears sprang into Dan's eyes and he unashamedly wiped them away with the back of his hand. Impulsively, he caught up Matt's gnarled hand in his, and his heart leaped with sudden hope.

Matt's pulse still beat! Matt Jordy still lived! He looked up to meet Elaine's eyes across the lantern light, and the girl nodded in quick understanding.

"Dad!" she called. "Hurry—we have to take this man home; he's hurt bad. Get the men to help—"

Surprise showed on the carpenter's face for only an instant, then he jumped into action. He tore the door from the nearest shed for a stretcher, and they laid Matt carefully on it to carry him to the Cooper house. Elaine ran ahead to get things ready.

"Why they want to save a damned outlaw?" somebody in the crowd muttered. "Why they taken him—"

"That's the marshal's business!" a second voice retorted. "Dan knows what he's doin'!"

The marshal! Wonderingly, Dan felt for his badge. It was still there. He was marshal of Devil's Fork. He had fulfilled his duty with Matt's gun. If only Matt could know—

They laid Matt Jordy on the bed in the spare room—Dan's bed. And the men hurried out. From the doorway Emmet asked, "Anything more we can do to help, Dan?"

Dan shook his head. In the lamplight Matt looked bad. He had been shot through the chest, low down. He didn't have a chance. It was a miracle he still breathed.

But his ragged breathing came faster, stronger, and the man opened his eyes to stare around the room. He found Dan, and his lips formed a question: "You downed 'em all?" His words were so low they were scarcely audible.

Dan nodded. "You got Bull-Nose. I took Val and Heck and a couple of others. Matt—I had to shoot—"

"Sure you did, Boy! You did your duty. You're a lawman!" Matt turned his head to stare past Dan, and Dan thought he was sinking. But Matt's words came stronger. "A good boy. Never killed a man in all the years I knew him. Not 'til it was his duty. Never went bad—"

DAN TURNED to find Elaine beside him, her eyes shining with tears as she looked into Matt's face.

"A straight one," Matt went on. "He'll do to ride the river with any old time—"

"I know it, Matt!" Elaine cried. "I know—"

"But, Matt!" Dan whispered, his voice choking. "I had to—to kill my own brothers!"

The man on the bed fought a slowly

losing battle for life, for breath to speak. Weakly, he shook his grizzled head.

"Not your brothers—they're Jordys, but never your brothers—" He paused, struggling for a minute's more time. To Dan, shocked numb by the older man's words, the seconds stretched into an eternity.

"You don't even look like a Jordy," Matt went on tiredly. "Your pa and ma came in a covered wagon—got caught in a sheep and cattle war—camp shot up by mistake. I found you when you was knee-high, tried to raise you best I could."

"What—" Dan gasped. "Who—" A hundred questions stampeded through his mind. But Matt was weakening.

"Your pa's name—Telford. Good, hard-workin' man—not like a Jordy. No white sheep in the Jordy clan. I spawned a pack of lobos—better off—"

Matt Jordy's breathing stopped abruptly and he lay still.

Dan looking down, too choked up to speak. Slowly, he turned to face Elaine, to meet the understanding light in her shining eyes. She reached out and took his hand in hers.

"Dan," she said softly. "I knew you had a great load on your mind, a desperate worry. Now it is all settled." She looked down at Matt's quiet face, and back to Dan. "He was proud of you, Dan! And now you have your own name. Telford. Dan Telford. A good name, one you can build a life on." She met Dan's eyes. and the light in her own eyes softened imperceptibly.

"Dan, if you need me—if you want me— I'd be very proud to share that name—"

Dan stood dead-still for a long moment. Then he caught Elaine in his arms and held her close.

"It's too much!" he whispered, his face against the soft red-gold of her hair. "More than a man should rightfully ask! A good name—a new start—and you!"

★

COMING NEXT ISSUE

A New "Howdy and Irish" Novel, by the dean of Tophand Western Authors

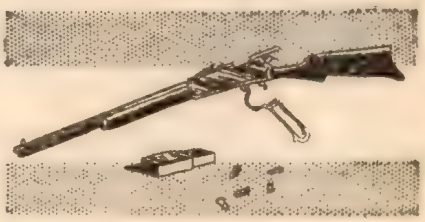
W. C. Tuttle

You won't want to miss

TOURISTS TO BOOTHILL

and, in addition, we are proud to announce

32 More Pages will be added

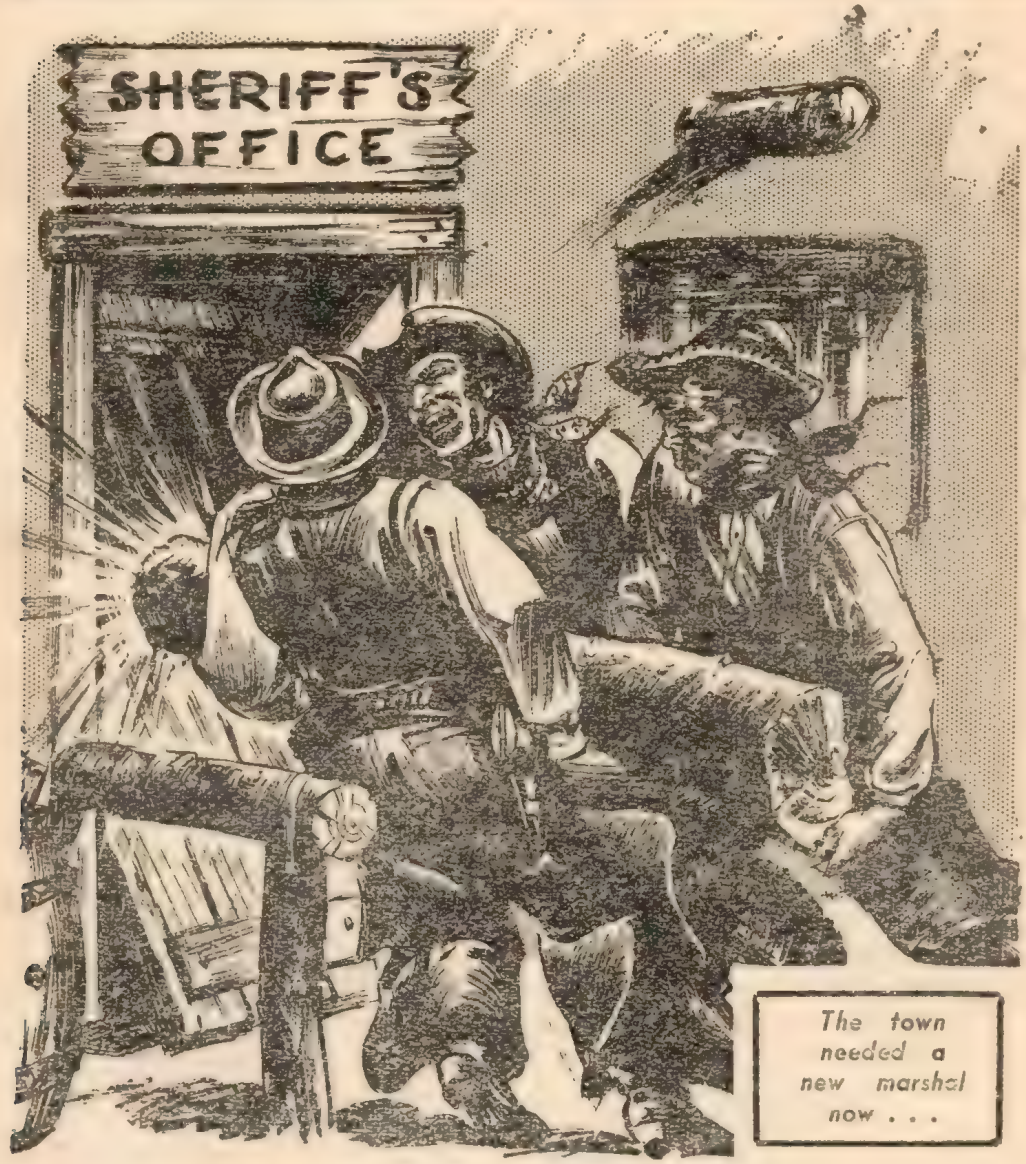


Look for our big November issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

Black Shemwell

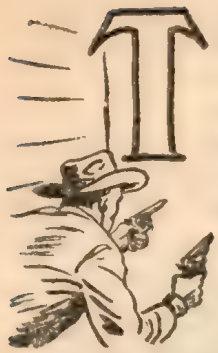
By Ben Smith



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Maybe a man who has been away from guns too long should keep on avoiding them . . .

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



THE BLACK gelding walked slowly down the rutted main street of Deadwater, its hooves sending up little gouts of dust. Shemwell rode easily, yet alertly, his body slightly twisted in the silver-mounted saddle, looking for the man who might answer the description of Lyn Arnold.

Shemwell's clothing was the color of a moonless midnight, piped in narrow bands of white at pocket edges and at the collar of his shirt. Belying his overdressed appearance, two .45's hung low at his hips. They were shiny with use and attention, on the pearl butts an inset ebony stallion reared. Fancy guns, but not the guns of a gunman...

Negating any appearance of softness, too, his eyes were like polished agate. His face was lean and hard, sun-bronzed; his mouth was tempered at the corners with the upswing of optimism. Shemwell was looking for a man. Finding him, he might kill him. That was in the future. Maybe—the thought passed—maybe he had been too long away from his guns; maybe a man had to live daily with death to be able to kill. Lee had believed that, had believed that any man had to be born with kicking guns in his hands in order to use them. But—Lee was dead.

The man who scurried from the *Golden Slipper* didn't see Shemwell. If he had noticed the man in black, he simply would have put him down as an overdressed rodeo rider—an exhibitionist—and would have paid him no further attention. But he was walking along the edge of the street, looking. Finding a stone as big as a doubled fist, he tossed it into the window of a building across the street; in the shower of tinkling glass, he vanished into an alley.

Shemwell watched.

As he drew opposite the *Golden Slipper,* he looked in the direction the man had thrown the stone. The shattered glass bore the remains of the legend: *Deadwater Courier.*

It was almost as if some unseen marksman were waiting for Black Shemwell. The stone came back through the broken window, striking the gelding on one glossy shoulder; it sent the animal pitching, more from fright than pain. Shemwell quieted the horse, then dismounted, feeling rising anger.

INSIDE the printshop, the air was cool, a little musty. An old man stood before a font of type, a partly-filled stick in his hands. At the high, old-fashioned, desk a honey haired girl was crying.

"What the hell...?" Shemwell asked.

"Sorry, stranger," the man with the typestick said; "we were aiming for a rat."

"Your aim's bad."

The girl raised her head from her arms. Her lips, trembling a little at the corners, were full and firm. There was a small chin, thrust outward with determination; a sprinkling of freckles across the nose. "I threw it," she said.

Shemwell grinned, relaxing. "Then, *your* aim's bad," he said.

The old man carefully laid the typestick on a battered make-ready stone. His face was the color of a new penny. Some part of his life had been spent on the range, under the sun and stars; but his hair, a frosting of silver-grey, gave the reason he had sought less arduous pursuits. "Some of these people," he said, bluntly, "don't like what we print. The rock through our window is only one of many things; there's a hell comin' in Deadwater."

Even so, Shemwell reasoned, it could be no affair of his. His business here was Lyn Arnold—no one else.

"Maybe," Shemwell advanced, "you hadn't ought to print it."

The girl regarded him scornfully. "We'd be as bad as Lyn Arnold, then," she said.

Shemwell's eyes turned dangerously cold. Only a moment before, the troubles of this girl and old man had been separate, distinct from his; now, with the mention of Arnold's name, the three of them must be allied.

"There's two kinds of people here," the old man explained: "Lyn Arnold's crowd, and a handful of decent ones." He was tamping tobacco into a scarred pipe with blunt forefinger. "I'm George Colson; this is Louise, my daughter. I don't know which side of the fence you're on, stranger. But, I'm ready to declare my hand; I'm against Arnold."

"So am I. My name is Black Shemwell."

There was a gasp from the direction of the desk. As Shemwell turned, he saw Louise, her hand to her mouth.

"Lee." She whispered. "Dad! Remember? Lee Shemwell."

"He was my brother." Black walked toward the door. "I'll be going now," he said, "if you'll tell me where I can find Arnold."

Colson said: "Arnold is a tricky man. He's got plenty men on his payroll; he's dangerous."

"So am I," Black said, "at times. This is one of them."

"Wait." It was Louise Colson who spoke, abruptly. "Dad. Get some of the men together; help him."

Black shook his head. "It's a private fight, right now," he said. "Maybe, later. Maybe I can't do what I aim to do. Then, I'll call for help."

"But, you're no gunman; Arnold is. So are two or three who work for him."

"No," Black Shemwell admitted. "I'm no gunman—but, I could be." He grinned, thinly. "After all, it's a poor man who can't do two things well."

He was gone.

OUTSIDE, the pale sunshine washed the dust of the street. A dog barked; came loping in a queer sidewise manner along the board sidewalk. From within the *Golden Slipper,* directly across the way, someone shouted. The saloon doors were as motionless as the lids to a pair of coffins; Shemwell thrust them aside with a twist of his broad shoulders, stood, letting his eyes become accustomed to the dimness.

A narrow bar ran alongside the room, a few tables here and there about the floor. At one of them, five men were playing stud. They watched their cards, didn't look up in Shemwell's direction. This, in itself, was ominous; normal curiosity should have caused them to want to see who had entered.

The bartender mopped listlessly at the mahogany before him. "I'm looking for Lyn Arnold," Shemwell announced.

The barkeep leaned his pudgy elbows on the bar and regarded Shemwell insolently, his small, yellow teeth revealed in a mocking grin. "Lotsa people are," he replied. "What's your business, friend?"

"Private business. Do I see Arnold?"

The fat man blew perspiration from the tip of his bulbous nose. Behind him, Shemwell could hear the slap of the cards as someone dealt. "I'll go see," the bartender said. He lifted a section of the bar and slid out, grunting a little with the exertion. He vanished through a doorway at the back of the saloon. Shemwell turned and hooked a heel on the brass rail watching the poker game. He caught the eyes of one of the players as he turned, quiet, staring eyes. The game went on. No one said anything.

"He's in his office." The bartender was back. "Through there—at the end of the hall."

Shemwell walked alone down a hallway that seemed as long and lonely as the path to glory, and as dimly lighted as the road to Death. There was a single door at the end. Shem-

well pushed it open without knocking. "Hello, Arnold," he said, quietly.

The man who stood behind the desk was blond, rangy of frame, with quick, long-fingered hands. He wore a pearl grey coat and black string tie. This, then, was Lyn Arnold. He didn't look dangerous—unless one noticed the cold stare of his eyes; the twitching of a tiny muscle in his cheek. His glance was as impersonal as the gaze of a rattlesnake. There was depth here, and danger.

"There's a Shemwell now Sheriff in Deadwater," Lee's letter had read. *"I hope I'll make a good one."* Lee had been young, cocky.

"Only one thorn in this bed of roses, guy named Arnold. He looks like a battered saint but has a heart as black as the pip on an ace of spades. We'll cross, someday, I guess."

Lee could never resist a dig at his older brother. His letter had continued: *"It would be no spot for you, Black—or any man who has traded his guns for book-learning. No place for an* educated *man. But, me? Don't worry, Black. I can take care of myself."*

It had proven that the spot Lee was in was not the spot for any man who wanted to live...

BLACK SHEMWELL looked at Lyn Arnold. "I've come to kill you," he said, evenly.

"Barking loud?" Arnold regarded Shemwell solemnly, biting the end from a slim cigar.

"I bite, too," Shemwell replied.

"Oh." Arnold's glance was full of amusement as he struck a match on the sole of one highly-shined boot. He laughed. A short, hard sound like the bark of a fox. "Look behind you," he said.

The five men who had been playing poker out in the saloon stood in the hallway outside the open door. One of them, a whiskered giant, showed his broken teeth in a leer. "Look," he sneered. "Fancypants."

Shemwell looked at them for a moment, then back at Arnold. "You believe in being careful, don't you?"

Arnold smiled. "Always. That's what caused your brother's trouble; he wasn't careful."

"I didn't name any names," Shemwell said softly.

"Your guns talk for you," Arnold told him; "your brother had a pair just like them. That's how I happened to be ready for you. Of course, I never take any chances, anyway; I have found that a careful life is a long life."

Shemwell fumed, inwardly. There had been two pairs of these custom-made Colts originally. Lee and Black had both received them for their twenty-first birthdays. It had been their father's hope that the boys would live up to those guns; be fair, honest...

Now, Lee—who had been both fair and honest—was dead.

Behind him, Shemwell could almost feel the tear of hot lead into his back. There was a faint snick as a gun was cocked. Arnold was watching curiously. "Any last requests?" he asked.

"No."

Black cursed his own foolhardiness. Colson had warned him; had offered help. He should have waited, scouted out this man who was his enemy. Now, without harming Arnold in any way, Black would join his brother in Deadwater's Boothill. It was a hard way to go; a hell of a way—without a shot in his own defense.

SHEMWELL twisted abruptly, trying to throw the corner of the desk between his body and the waiting guns at the door. From beside him, a misty blur, he saw Arnold going for a hideout gun at the waistband of his breeches. There was a bellowing, and fiery pain lanced at Shemwell's shoulder. Arnold, his white teeth tight on his cigar, leveled the Derringer for another shot; at close range, the .50 calibre slug could turn a man's insides to mincemeat.

"All right, boys." The voice from the window cut through a lull in the firing like the call of a trumpet. "Keep your hands high and your noses clean."

The bore of a six-gun loomed through the window, looking like the open end of a joint of stovepipe. From behind the old Frontier model, George Colson scowled. The old gun bucked as he snapped a shot at an eager member of Arnold's outfit, who was trying to slip through the door. There was a dead man there—the one with the whiskers—and his body prevented the rest of them from piling into the room. Shemwell was aware, then, that he had held his own guns in his hands, had shot a man. But the pain was too great at the moment, and there was too much fog in the room to see or care.

"Get out of there, Black." Colson's shout came through the window. "Get out."

Shemwell turned, his guns still in his hands. The doorway was filled with cursing, shoving men. Only Colson's angle of fire prevented them from piling in, now. The body had been moved. Arnold, directly in line with Colson's gun, was unable to use his Derringer. S l o w l y, Shemwell backed toward the window, stepped across the sill. Beside him, his old face scowling, was Colson; the fancy hammer on his gun was drawn back to full cock.

Shemwell knew that, as soon as he dropped from the window to the ground outside, Arnold and his men would crowd in, shooting at the defenseless backs. Colson, by himself, could never cover his retreat. It was upon striking the hard ground of the alley, Black Shemwell found that Colson was not alone. At the corner of a carriage shed, out of the line of fire, Louise Colson stood; jutting before her, around the corner of the building, were the gaping muzzles of a shotgun.

"This way."

It was Colson, scuttling crab-like under the windows, along the wall of the saloon. As they reached the comparative safety of the angle of the building, Black heard the scatter-gun bellow, then bellow again. There was a high yell of pain from the saloon, the rattle of falling glass, and the light sound of running feet.

Shemwell felt again the pain from his wounded shoulder, the weakness from the loss of blood. Although it was still daylight, he was dimly aware of the strange shadows that crept across the dust of the street. It was noise and smoke and flight, all unreal. . . .

●

"FEELING better?" Louise Colson was deftly bandaging Shemwell's shoulder when he awakened. There was the soft light of a lamp, and the smell of food. He was on a bed, Shemwell found, in a strange room.

"Some," he said. He sat up, and the bed started turning beneath him.

A cool, slim hand pushed him back. "Don't be in a hurry. Dad's out front with the shotgun and his pockets full of shells. No one will bother us."

Shemwell grinned w e a k l y. "It looks," he said, "as if I'm in your debt. It *was* you, behind that scatter-gun."

Her voice was warm, friendly. "I've shot it before," she said. "But not at any of Arnold's men; I hope I get another chance."

Black Shemwell looked at her in wonderment. "I'll bet," he muttered, "you do, at that. You're a better gunman than I am, it seems."

"People are what they have to be," she said, shortly. "I don't like the gunman breed."

Her voice had changed, abruptly. Shemwell watched with some amazement as she almost fled from the room. Then, shrugging his shoulders, wincing with the pain—he had forgotten the hole in his upper arm—he tried to sleep. His thoughts kept him company. He was where he deserved to be. A man had no business taking

up his guns; there was a law. The law should be upheld. But, for Arnold, was there really any law? It was a knotty question for a wounded man to wrestle with. One thing for sure. Gunfighting should be left to gunmen...

•

At noon, next day, Colson made another trip into the bedroom where Shemwell was resting. Black felt a great deal better, almost normal except for his useless right arm. Colson had been courtesy itself, insisting on doing everything for Shemwell's comfort. But Louise had avoided Black; and he thought he knew why...

What had he done, really, except make things even more difficult for the Colsons and the rest of the decent people in Deadwater. He had succeeded only in stirring up a rattler's nest, without killing the king snake. Now, Arnold would see to it that everyone involved in the saloon shooting paid for their temerity. That put George and Louise Colson right on the spot; directly under Arnold's sights. Black sighed; it was up to him, he reasoned, to do something about that.

"Arnold sent this by a kid," Colson said, holding out a crumpled slip of paper.

The note read: *I'll be walking east in front of the* Golden Slipper *at five o'clock this afternoon.*

"It's a trap," Colson said, flatly. "He'll have it baited for you."

"Yeah," Shemwell said. His eyes were on something far away. He was looking through the window at the far reaches of the hills, thinking what a nice place Deadwater would be without Lyn Arnold.

"Yeah," he said, again. Then: "What time is it?"

"After three..." Colson stopped. His faded blue eyes were snapping with anger. "You're not going; it'd be what a crazy man would do, Black; it's suicide."

"Maybe."

Shemwell was on his feet, trying to get his shirt over his useless arm. Tiny beads of perspiration hung on his lip, evidence of the effort and the pain.

"With one good arm. Black, I won't let you go out there; you ain't got a chance."

Shemwell didn't answer. He was using his teeth to draw his shirtsleeve down over his left hand.

"All right," Colson said, grimly. "It's your own funeral. Maybe, I can help."

Shemwell grinned, but there was no mirth behind his slate-hard eyes. This thing had to be done, finished. Now, or later—what difference would it make? It had to be done...

•

THE SUN was casting late shadows in the street when Black Shemwell started his walk toward the west. Arnold's plan was apparent; it was the trick of a good gun-hand. With Black facing west, the late sun would be in his eyes. Arnold would have a good target and Shemwell would be highlighted to the men he probably had covering him from the roofs, from behind the false fronts of the stores.

A buckskin, his head drooping, slobbered in front of the hitchrail. The dog with the oblique gait scampered across the street, leaving a trail of yellow dust. There was the pungency of tobacco. Someone was silently watching and had lighted a smoke to ease jangled nerves. Shemwell was conscious of no sound, no movement.

Where was Lyn Arnold?

Black Shemwell walked slowly, his right shoulder bulky with bandages under his fancy shirt. His body moved as effortlessly as an animal's, his agate eyes were watchful. His left hand, his good hand, was hanging limply near the stallion that reared on the butt of his gun.

There was no sign of Arnold.

It was too quiet; there was a sort of hushed watchfulness, even to the

vacant faces of the buildings. From far down the street, a door slammed. Some cautious villager was retreating to safer quarters.

Then, from the *Golden Slipper*, Lyn Arnold walked. He was smiling, the inevitable cigar between his white teeth. His blond head was thrown back. Shemwell stopped his pacing. "Ready, Arnold?"

The gambler's eyes swept the roofline before he lowered his head, looked at Black. "Anytime," he said.

They walked toward each other.

It was Arnold's easy smile that betrayed him; it contrasted with the chill of his eyes. Arnold wanted Shemwell close to him. He had a reason for that silent stalk. Shemwell watched Arnold's eyes...

A scant ten feet separated them. Arnold moved. One nimble hand dipped for the Derringer, the other came up, over, scattering a handful of sand. Most of it struck its target, Shemwell's face. But, warned by Arnold's squint, Black had closed his eyes. His Colt was in his left hand, talking, when he looked at Arnold again, feeling the grittiness of the sand in the perspiration on his face.

From above, and behind, came the sound of another gun. Not the high crack of a rifle, but the bellow of a scatter-gun. Shemwell grinned, fired again. Smoke eddied, mixed with the golden dust. Everything was indistinct; there was a roar of the shotgun again, a thin scream of pain.

There was a thundering silence.

ARNOLD twisted, going down like a lightning felled pine tree, the Derringer dangling uselessly from his limp fingers.

"That's for Lee," Shemwell said. And, Lyn Arnold, dying, understood.

Black was conscious of someone near, someone watching. It was George Colson. There was a smear of blood across the old man's cheek where a bullet had creased; in his hands was the shotgun. "There was a couple staked out on top the saloon," he said, grimly. "With rifles. I kind of embarrassed them."

"Thanks," Shemwell said, quietly, dropping his left gun in its holster. "Thanks, a lot."

●

It was night. The black gelding stirred beneath him as Shemwell said goodby to Louise Colson. The job was done; Black's time in Deadwater was used up. In a way, he was sorry. Deadwater, without Lyn Arnold might be a good place in which to live.

"I thought you were just another gun-crazy hooligan," she said, softly. "I didn't know."

Black shook his head. "The Black is short for Blackstone," he told her. "My mother wanted me to be a lawyer."

"And, instead...?"

He laughed. "You don't know my mother. Back home, I *am* a lawyer."

"But...Lyn Arnold. You shot him."

"I said it was a poor man who couldn't do two things well." He paused. "There are two kinds of law, I guess; one kind is no good where a man like Arnold is concerned."

Shemwell, before she could guess his intention, leaned from the saddle and kissed her. "Is there a place for me in Deadwater?" he asked.

"If you want it."

"I'll be back, then."

She watched him ride away, her fingers wonderingly against her lips.

"Black!" It was an urgent whisper.

"Yes."

"You can do *three* things well."

His reply was an easy laugh that floated back to her. She watched until Black Shemwell and his gelding had vanished into the night.

★

Judy swung her shovel at the encircling buzzards, as Ace watched, helplessly...

THROUGH TICKET TO BOOTHILL

By J. J. Mathews

The set-up was plain to all: Don Pesco, notorious bandit-leader was terrorizing the valley. But Ace Champion saw too much that was not plain: he knew Don Pesco, knew that the outlaw never made war on women . . .

ACE CHAMPION, wandering town-tamer, halted the black stallion and turned quickly in the saddle as he heard the shot. Standing in the stirrups, he looked down at the valley floor, his dark eyes squinting under the glare of the sun, one strong hand lifting the black sombrero from his dark head. "Bullets mean trouble," he muttered. "And at the present moment I ain't hankering for it. We'll amble along to Westbar, Blackie. I'm plump tired of trouble." Without another glance behind him, the lanky rider reined the stallion forward.

Another shot rang out on the clear air. Throwing himself from the saddle, Ace moved over to the rim of the mountain and gazed down at the valley below him. As he lay there, a rider came into view. The rider was bent well forward in the saddle of a paint horse, one hand waving what appeared to be a six-shooter. Further back along the trail came three more riders, their horses cutting down the distance with alarming speed. Even as Ace watched the three riders, one lifted a rifle and pointed it at the paint's rider.

"Three against one," Ace muttered. "But for once in your life, Ace Champion you're not poking your nose into something which don't concern you nohow. I'm plumb glad I'm not in that feller's jeans."

He was about to draw away from the rim when something about the

Feature Novel of Deadly Mystery

lone rider caught his eyes. A surprised curse left his lips. There, flying behind the lone rider was a mass of long golden hair which caught and reflected the morning sun.

"A woman! Well, I'll be hogtied!" Rising, Ace lifted a Winchester from the saddle-boot and snapped the rifle to his shoulder. "That puts a different light on the subject, Blackie."

Even as Ace spoke, there came a sharp report and the paint horse went down, sending its rider sprawling. The three pursuers came on as the lone rider rose, a revolver glinting in the sun.

Ace squeezed the trigger of his Winchester, grinned as the bullet kicked up dust in front of the leading rider who jerked his mount to a rearing halt. Another bullet from Ace's rifle lifted a sombrero high into the air and sent the three others back along the trail. Ace grinned again as he sent another bullet after them.

The grin was still on his lips as he mounted and turned the stallion towards the steep track leading down into the valley.

The girl bending over the paint horse glanced up as, without a word, Ace bent over the paint, drew his .45 and turned. "Sorry, mam," he drawled, "but he has to be shot."

There were tears in the blue eyes which looked into his. Ace thought they were the bluest eyes he had ever seen. *Soft and misty now,* he thought. *But I bet they were full of fire ten minutes ago.* Aloud, he said. "If you'd just turn your back a moment, mam?"

Wordless, the girl turned. Her shapely figure stiffened as the shot disturbed the silence. She turned and faced him as he holstered the black-butted .45. "Thank you," she whispered. She was wearing a split riding-skirt of soft buckskin and her shirt, cut for a man, hugged the firm contours of her body. About her slim waist was buckled a business-like .45 and on her feet were a pair of small, Mexican riding boots. Her voice, as she whispered, "Thank you," reminded Ace of the dreamy, soft music of his far away Texas home.

"Shucks, mam," he muttered. "It's nothing. Howcome those three...?" He broke off as he noticed her staring at the tied-down holsters on his lean hips.

"A professional gunslinger," she said coldly, her blue eyes bitter. She turned away. "Please accept my thanks for your help."

Ace stood staring after her. Bitter lines came to his mouth and his dark eyes narrowed. He overtook the slim girl and turned her roughly. "What's wrong with a professional gunslinger?" he rasped. "So long as the guns are used right."

"I hate professionals," the girl said, bitterly. "They live on blood-money; their guns are hired out to the highest bidder." She gave a savage shrug of her shoulders. "Please take your hand off my shoulder; there's nothing more to be said. You've helped me and I've thanked you. If you want money for your help, come along to the ranch house with me."

Ace's hand dropped until it was brushing the butt of the .45. His eyes were bitter and bleak as he drawled. "So even you judge a man by the way he wears his hardware. Have you ever stopped and considered that sometimes a man has no choice in the way he wears his guns? When a man's life depends on the speed of his draw, he would be foolish to wear loose holsters. Good day, mam."

But as he would have pulled away, her grip was there on his arm. Something about his voice and the bitter lines which had appeared about his mouth softened her. "I'm sorry," she breathed. "But with all the killings in these parts strangers are not very welcome; my name is Judy Morgan."

Ace grinned and shoved out a huge hand. "Ace, mam. Ace Champion."

A bullet kicked up dust a few feet to the left and then came the sharp report. With a silent curse on his lips, Ace pulled the girl with him and forced her down behind a large rock at the side of the trail.

RIDING recklessly towards him, their hands waving rifles, red bandannas covering their faces, were three horsemen. As they drew closer, one of the men steadied his rifle. The bullet smacked into the rock a few inches from Ace's head and kicked a fragment of rock into his face.

The black stallion came as Ace whistled. Lifting the rifle from the saddle-boot, Ace snapped a bullet at the leading rider. A hard grin split his lips as the rider threw his arms in the air and then crashed from the saddle. The other two riders, startled, pulled their mounts to the side of the trail and disappeared behind some rocks.

A low, musical laugh turned Ace to the girl who was leaning against the rock beside him, her hand pointing at the stallion which had wandered across the trail and was now sitting on its haunches behind a large rock. Ace grinned and turned back to stare down the valley. "That's one of the many tricks I taught him when he was a youngster, mam. He's not gun-shy; he's just plumb careful."

"Keep down," he snapped as the girl looked over the rock, lifting her .45 from its holster. "Keep down; you're inviting a slug."

"I can shoot," came her swift reply.

Catching her by the shoulder, he forced her low. "You little fool," he muttered angrily, but not without a trace of admiration. "At that distance, your hand-gun is about as effective as a pea-shooter."

Ace stood still for a moment, then he glanced over the rock. Nothing moved. He looked at the riderless horse, shifted his eyes to the sprawled out figure on the trail, started to glance away; switched his gaze back to the sprawled figure again.

The figure had moved. One moment it had been sprawled in the dust with its boots sticking heavenwards; then it had reared upward and sideward until the head was in the place where the boots had been. Now, with slow, jerky movements, still on its back, it was moving toward the rocks where the other two men had taken cover. Ace blinked and looked more closely. He felt better when he saw the rope which was attached to the boots of the dead gunman, dragging him towards the rocks.

"Mighty careful," he muttered; "they don't believe in leaving their dead about."

"They must be leaving," the girl had moved and was looking over the rock. "They always take their dead with them."

Ace didn't reply. He peered over the rock and lifted the Winchester to his shoulder, waited. Presently, the two horsemen, one carrying a limp figure across his saddle, broke from behind the rocks and headed down the valley. The rifle in Ace's hand cracked and the killer carrying the limp burden clutched swiftly at the saddlehorn.

Without a word to the girl, Ace mounted the stallion and rode in the direction the two men had taken. For several minutes, he searched the ground where the figure had been sprawled. Then, catching the riderless horse, he led it back to the waiting girl. "Here's a mount for you, mam;

it's wearing an H-in-a-circle brand."

"Our brand," the girl said bitterly. "At least, we've got back one of our horses."

Ace looked at the uninviting walls of the narrow valley, the only approach to the left rim being the dangerous track down which he had ridden the stallion. The right wall, he reflected, was certainly too steep and smooth for even a horse fly to climb. *What is there behind all this that makes men turn their guns on a woman?* And he wondered how such a lovely girl could harbor such bitterness as she replied.

"As though Don Pesco would worry about a woman being under his killers' guns."

"Don Pesco!" It was a sharp exclamation. Quickly, he recovered. His voice was a drawl again. "You're plumb mistaken, mam; Pesco wouldn't make war on a woman. And, anyway, he has never crossed the Pesco mountains."

She turned quickly. "What do you know about Don Pesco? Are you—?"

His slow drawl cut her short. "Everyone knows about Don Pesco, the gentleman bandit, the Mexican who fights on the side of law and order. Every honest Sheriff and lawman between here and Texas respects that little hombre—even though he is a bandit with a reward on his head. Don Pesco is a wanted man, but his guns have never been turned on an honest person. In the eyes of the law he's a killer, a robber and a rustler but its only because he goes to the aid of the underdog. Nope, mam, you're wrong; Don Pesco would never turn his guns on a woman."

"He must have decided on a change," she said, taking the reins of the bay horse. "For the past eight months, he's been terrorizing the territory, rustling and murdering. He—"

She stiffened and followed Ace's gaze. Racing down the valley, about three hundred yards away, was a rider. He was bent low in the saddle and his hand was holding a revolver. As the rider pulled the horse to a rearing halt, he dismounted with a flying leap and covered Ace with the .45.

"What's all the shooting, Judy?" he asked in a soft, modified voice. "If this cowhand is pestering you—?"

"I told you before that it's 'Miss Morgan' to you," the girl said coldly. "And I wasn't being pestered until you came along, Mister Ranklin."

"Now, Judy," the dark-faced, handsome man replied softly, "that's no way to speak; I heard the shooting and came to see what it was all about.

"Thanks," Judy said coldly. "for coming along half an hour after the danger has passed."

The face colored with anger, but it passed as quickly as a wind-driven cloud across the face of the moon. "You know that's not true, Judy," he said with an injured air. "I would like to meet up with that man." His voice sank to a softer tone. "Why don't you let me take all the trouble from your shoulders, Judy? You and your father can't hold out against Don Pesco; all the other small ranchers learnt that to their regret." He dropped the .45 into its holster. "My offer still stands, Judy. Don Pesco wouldn't have the nerve to trouble you once you're married to me."

"Marry you!" The golden head went back and peals of scornful laughter rippled from the soft mouth. "I'd rather marry a rattlesnake."

Ranklin's face went livid with rage; taking a swift stride forward, he caught the girl's shoulders. "Laugh!" he muttered, all this smoothness of manner and voice dropping from him. "Laugh, damn yer!" He shook her until her golden hair tumbled in wild disorder about her face. "I can wait. You'll come to *me* before very long;

you and yer damn haughtiness. I'll—"

RANKLIN got no further. A strong arm jerked him backward and a bunched fist, rising from Ace's knee, caught him on the point of the chin and hurled him backward where he sprawled in the dust of the trail. "Haven't you ever been taught how to act with a lady?" Ace drawled. "Get on your horse and ride, Ranklin. Pronto."

Ranklin stared down at the six-shooter which lay in the middle of the trail. At last he raised his eyes to the lean man before him. "I'll get yer for this, cowboy."

"I'll be plumb careful not to let you come up behind me. Pick up your fancy iron, Ranklin; careful like," Ace waved his .45.

Without another word, Ranklin mounted his horse and raced it madly up the valley.

"There goes one bad critter," Ace muttered. He turned at a light touch on his arm.

"I'm sorry," Judy breathed. "I've caused you to make a dangerous enemy for yourself. Ranklin will never forget what you've done. I shouldn't have said to him what I did, but he won't leave me alone; and each time I refuse him, he goes into a rage. Now I've caused you trouble."

"Trouble, mam," Ace drawled, "is my half-brother." But as he helped the girl into the saddle and turned with her up the valley, he couldn't help wondering just how he would come out of it if he ever matched draws with Ranklin. Ranklin had been at a disadvantage as he came up from his cramped position back there in the valley; even then, his draw had been a blur of movement, of perfect timing.

The walls of the valley dropped behind and presently Ace and his companion emerged into open country. "Plumb wonderful grazing land, mam," Ace remarked, his eyes on the prairie.

Judy didn't answer immediately. When she did turn her head to him, she said suddenly, "Mister Champion, are you looking for a job. We need er—a man who's not afraid of slugs."

"You need a gunslinger," Ace said bitterly; "a man who sells his guns for blood money. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

Ace looked her squarely in the eyes, his face losing its bitterness as he grinned. "Suppose you tell me all about it as we ride along?" he asked kindly. *About twenty two,* he thought.

A troubled expression had crossed her face. "There's not much to tell. Don Pesco, rustler and murderer, has crossed the Pesco mountains."

"That's not correct, but go on, ma'am."

"Eight months ago," the girl said, "Don Pesco left his recognised haunts and crossed the Pesco mountains. Since then he had been roaming at will, murdering and rustling. At first the small ranchers fought back, but it was a hopeless fight. Pesco murdered their hands and stole their cattle until the ranchers sold out and moved on with their families. It became impossible to get cowhands who were willing to fight the feared Pesco. Out of the small ranchers dad is the only one left, and all his hands have left him but one. Three of our cowhands left last week—after three of their pals were murdered by Pesco's men."

"This Pesco hombre sounds like one mean critter," Ace drawled.

Judy shuddered and her blue eyes clouded with horror. "One night Pesco tacked a notice to our ranch-house warning our hands to leave the H-in-a-circle. The hands didn't take any notice to the warning, at first; they treated it more or less as a joke. But it was no joke. Three days later one of our hands shot himself out on the range. Don Pesco's men had cut out his tongue."

"And Carl Ranklin? If he's so pow-

erful, as he claimed back there, why hasn't he dealt himself a hand in this game? What outfit is he?"

The soft lips twisted scornfully. "He owns the Star ranch five miles to the west of the H-in-a-circle. He claims that it's not his fight until Pesco bothers him. Ranklin claims that he's doing his share of helping the small ranchers. He buys their land and cattle when they are ready to quit—and he *does* pay a fair price. If it wasn't for that, I'd say that Ranklin is in with Pesco; but if he was he wouldn't pay so well for their land."

"And the law?"

"Sheriff Rae is the only law in Westbar and he's never sober; he lives in his office."

"Just how powerful is Ranklin?"

"Ranklin owns Westbar and everyone and everything in it," she replied simply.

"Dad warned me not to go riding alone," she said suddenly, "but I was tired of staying at the ranch-house. I—I don't know why Pesco's men were chasing me back there. I—I don't really understand it all. Don Pesco hasn't troubled us as much as he did the other ranchers. He used to swoop down from the badlands and rustle half a rancher's herd at each raid; but he has been taking our whitefaces in small numbers—as though he is being lenient."

"Or acting under orders?" Ace muttered as he gazed at the rambling ranch-house in the distance. But, as she turned an inquiring face and asked, "What do you mean?" he said, "Nothing," his face thoughtful.

2

THE EVENING meal in the living-room of the large ranch-house had been a cheerful one, despite the troubled atmosphere. Ace, sitting in a comfortable chair, was smoking and regarding Judy with open admiration as her fingers pushed the darning needle, the flickering light of the kerosene light reflected in her hair. Castiron Morgan, Judy's father, interrupted Ace's thoughts.

"You're letting yourself in fer a heap of trouble, young feller, by hitching yourself to the H-in-a-circle brand. But we sure can do with your help." Castiron passed a hand under his sandy moustache and his blue eyes were friendly. "If I had a few more hands like you, I'd welcome an attack from Pesco and his bandits."

"That Pesco skunk has no heart." Sandy Hale, a short, thin man with a long, red face stepped forward into the centre of the room, his skinny right hand resting on the butt of his six-shooter. "He's one coyote I'd like to see swinging on the end of a rope."

A rifle cracked and one of the large windows on the right hand side of the large room disappeared in a shower of flying glass. Ace left his seat, smothered the flames of the lamp and pushed Judy to the floor in passing. Jerking out his .45, he was on his knees before the window, trying to spot the rifleman.

The rifle flamed again and a bullet smacked into the wall above the window. The .45 in Ace's hand jerked and spat lead at the flash; out in the darkness of the cottonwoods, someone gave a loud cry of pain. Ace grinned, then ducked. Slugs from several rifles answered him; slugs smacked into the wall above the window.

A rifle cracked in the room at the window next to Ace, and Castiron's voice came clear for a second and then was silenced by the swift reply from the rifles in the trees.

Judy was in the fight. Ace heard her .45 voice its protest at the far end of the room. "Judy!" Ace called, a tight feeling mounting inside him. "Keep away from that window; keep down."

"Save your lead," Ace called softly as Sandy added his .45 to the fight. "They'll have to cross that clearing if they want to rush the house. In the moonlight, we'll be able to pick them off like sun lizards."

"Sound advice, young feller," Castiron replied gruffly. "I wish one of them hombres would show himself. One lucky thing fer us: This is the only side the attack can come from. I'd sure like ter see those skunks try and rush us from any other side of the house, where even a flea couldn't find cover. Now, why the devil did I let them cottonwoods grow out thar?"

"Daddy! How can you joke at a time like this?" Judy said, but her voice had the sound of laughter in it.

"Bah!" Castiron's voice came back. "They couldn't hit the side of a barn."

Ace thought over that remark. "They can't even put their slugs through the windows, now I come to think of it," Ace muttered. "In this moonlight that should be a simple task. Now, I wonder...?" Boldly, he rose and stood in front of the window, altered his mind, struck a match and held it where the riflemen could see it. At the same time he stepped nimbly to one side. He grinned as slugs buried themselves in the wall outside the window. "Plumb three feet out," he muttered; "now that's what I call terrible shooting."

A faint, red glow crept into the room and Judy called from the window. "Dad, Ace, the haystack is burning!"

"The dirty skunks!" Castiron said savagely. He turned to Ace who had rushed forward with him and was now staring out the window at the flaming haystack at the rear of the house. "Within a few minutes, it'll be as light as day in here; those skunks will be able ter sit back and pick us off. And if a wind comes up and carries them sparks..."

AS THOUGH in answer to Castiron's words, bullets racked the side of the house; for five minutes, the sound of rifle-fire filled the air as the light of the burning haystack grew brighter, driving darkness before it. At the windows, the three men and the girl sat with fingers on triggers, searching for some sign of life out in the cottonwoods.

Castiron took one look out the windows at the wagon with its load of hay on the outskirt of the trees. "The dirty, murdering thieves; that's my hay and my wagon. They're going ter burn me out with me own damn fodder. I wonder if they're going ter ask me fer a match?"

Ace grinned at the grim humor in the old man's voice. Lifting his rifle, he sat still, waiting, his eyes glued to that wagon of hay; his mouth set in a taut, grim line. "They'll have to push that wagon," he said grimly. "When it starts moving, don't try to shoot through the hay. Aim low; try to find those hombres' legs."

"It's not too late ter change yer mind, young feller," Castiron said; "we could cover yer. I know horses; and there's not a horse within five hundred miles of here could catch that stallion of yours."

"Thanks," Ace drawled, "but I'm staying all the same."

"Dad!" Judy's voice cut in. "You shouldn't have said that." And as she looked at Ace, the light from the flaming haystack flickering on her face, Ace saw the look she turned to him.

"I have me reasons," Castiron said gruffly. "Lass, I want Ace ter take yer with 'im."

"I'm staying," Judy said firmly.

"Thar she comes," Castiron yelled. His voice sank to a low, gruff tone. "Judy, lass, there's still time."

Sandy Hale stepped away from the window and walked forward, dropping his six-shooter into his holster. "Sorry, Castiron, but this is where I get out. We gain nothing by getting ourselves cooked in here. I don't mind facing blazing guns, but when it comes to being burnt to death, that's a different matter; Judy can come with me, if she likes."

"I'm staying, Sandy," Judy said coldly.

"Then I'll be leaving." Sandy turned and dashed for the back door. "As soon as I can, throw a saddle on my nag; if you have any brains, you'll follow me."

Castiron looked at the closed door. "Thar goes a man with no sand in his claws," he muttered, "even if he *can* look into the bore of a blazing smokepole."

"You're wasting time," Ace drawled; "use your rifle." Springing back to a window, he emptied his Winchester at the wagon of flaming hay which was moving slowly toward the house.

"Can't see their damn legs," Castiron muttered, his Winchester blazing.

Ace heard Judy join in the battle. He reloaded his rifle and sat listening. There was no mistaking the new sound; it was the thunder of pounding hoofs. Suddenly, the sound of gunfire filled the night, but it was coming from the opposite direction to that of the trees. Ace cursed himself for falling for such a simple trick. The wagon of flaming hay was just a trick to draw attention in that direction while the main gang rushed the house from the other side. Springing across the room, he fell on his knees before a window and shoved the barrel of his rifle through the pane of glass.

ACE'S FINGER relaxed on the trigger; the riders were racing past the house, their guns spitting lead toward the riflemen in the cottonwoods.

"Wal, I'll be hogtied!" Castiron said as he and Judy opened the door and stepped through into the moonlight. "Here I am all set fer a sample of hell, and help arrives; I wonder who those fellers could be?"

"Whoever they are, they're welcome," Ace applied a flame to the kerosene lamp.

Hoofs sounded outside the door and Judy said, "Why, it's Carl Ranklin." And a man's voice asked, "Judy, Castiron, are you all right? Those skunks are still running; they didn't even let us get within .45 range."

Ace didn't hear Judy's low reply, but Castiron's voice was plain. "Sure, Carl, but you came along just in time; those coyotes meant business."

Carl Ranklin's voice mingled with the sounds of creaking leather and jingling bits. "I saw the glow in the sky so I roused my men and burnt leather over here."

Ace stepped through the doorway, the light flickering at his back, the moon revealing his lanky figure. "You!" Ranklin snapped, the smile leaving his face. "I didn't expect to meet you so soon again, feller; take my advice and keep drifting on. Strangers are not wanted around here."

"I've taken a sudden fancy to this part of the West," Ace drawled. "I'm in no hurry to mosey along. I've been meeting some very interesting people these last few hours."

"If you're referring to Judy, I can assure you that you're wasting your time, Champion." Ranklin's hand dropped to the butt of the six-shooter on his right hip. "She doesn't like your kind."

Ace sauntered a little to one side; his movement was scarcely noticeable, but the distance he moved was enough to throw Judy out of line with any flying lead. His eyes were like ice as he drawled, "Lift that iron, Ranklin, and I'll blow you plumb out of your saddle; your gunslingers won't be much use to a dead man."

Judy stepped forward, deliberately placing her slim figure in the line of fire. "I can speak for myself, Carl Ranklin. Since when have I given you the right to interfere in my affairs?"

"Now, Judy," Ranklin said softly. "That's no way to speak after what I've done. I didn't mean..."

"I appreciate what you did," Judy replied coldly. "But I do not consider myself under any obligation to you. I would rather be back in the house taking my chances against Don Pesco than to have that happen."

"This Pesco seems to be one mean hombre." Ace was watching the eight men at Ranklin's back. "But what's in a name?" His words were addressed to no one in particular, but as he spoke, he was looking directly at Ranklin. Calmly, Ace turned his back on those smouldering eyes and walked into the house.

●

"I never did like that Ranklin skunk," Castiron said, five minutes later, as he and Judy sat facing Ace in the living-room. "He was always a wild devil. His father kept him in line while he was alive, but when he died Ranklin just went to the pack. He fired all his old hands and gathered a bunch of Mexicans about him. All during the past twelve months, too."

Ace glanced up quickly from the cigarette in his hand. "Has anyone ever caught sight of this Pesco outlaw who's causing all this trouble?"

"Wal, nope," Castiron glanced sharply at Ace. "Why?"

Ace didn't answer the question. "Then, how can you be so sure that it's Don Pesco?"

Castiron scratched his head. "Wal, now, damn if I know. Someone said it was Don Pesco, but I don't know who he was."

"Was that feller Ranklin?"

"Damn if I know now, young feller. Why, someone just said it was Pesco and I guess we all just believed him. But it's Pesco all right; why all these questions, young feller?"

"Just curiosity," Ace murmured, glancing at the door as the sounds of restless hoofs came to his ears. Rising, he went swiftly forward and stepped out into the moonlight. With a surprised curse, he sprang swiftly over to the horse which was standing near the front verandah.

There was a man in the saddle of the grey horse. But he wasn't sitting in the saddle; he was face-down across it and a rope, passing around his body and that of the horse, held him in position.

And he was dead.

"It's Sandy," Castiron muttered beside Ace. "The dirty murdering coyotes got him. Let's get 'im into the house."

"Don't come in, mam," Ace said to Judy as he passed her with Sandy Hale's limp figure in his arms. "I'll take him to his room; and in the morning I'll give him a decent burial."

"Ace, thar's a note under his gunbelt," Castiron said as Ace lowered the figure on to the bed, face up. "What does it say?"

Ace didn't reply. He had taken the note in his huge hand.

"What does that thar note say?" Castiron sat in the low chair across from Ace, and leant forward as Ace opened the crumpled sheet of paper in his hand.

A message had been scrawled on the paper with the point of a slug. Ace had to hold the paper close to the light to read the faint words. He read aloud.

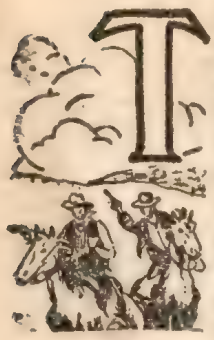
"Take heed, Champion. The next one will be you. But you won't be dead when we cut off your ears. This is the only warning you'll get. Drift on. Don't be a

fool, Champion; Don Pesco has no friends —Don Pesco.

Judy gave a sharp gasp and Cast-iron glanced inquiringly at Ace. "What does that last piece about Don Pesco having no friends mean, Ace?" He gazed keenly at Ace. "It could mean that Pesco even turns on a friend if that friend is in the way. What do you figger it means?"

"I can't figger it," Ace drawled, but as he turned toward his room there was a puzzled and troubled expression on his face.

3



THE FOLLOWING night Ace retired to his room a few hours after dusk. He had spent the whole of the day on the back of a young, half-broken colt, familiarizing himself with the general layout of the H-in-a-Circle spread. He was a little weary, but sleep wouldn't come. At last, dressing, and buckling the .45's about his waist, he went to the stable where Blackie nickered softly as a saddle was thrown across his back.

An hour later, Ace had crossed the moonlit prairie and was deep in the ranges, heading toward the large valley, where the walls were not more than twenty yards apart, he reined the stallion to a halt and made a cigarette, his keen eyes watching the herd of whiteface cattle in the knee-high grasses of the valley.

Suddenly, he stiffened. His sharp ears had caught the sound of shod hoofs on the rocky trail behind him. Dismounting, he led the stallion behind some large rocks at the side of the trail, his right hand freeing the .45 in its holster.

"Looking for someone, hombre?" Ace drawled, stepping into the middle of the trail.

There came a gasp from the rider and Ace said quickly, "Judy! What are you doing out alone at this hour?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said, as she dismounted and walked over to him. "I like riding in the moonlight. I saw you leave the house, and decided that I would be in no danger if I kept close to you. Daddy won't let me go riding alone even during the day, now."

He took a step toward her, then paused and turned quickly to the mouth of the valley where he halted, tensed, gazing at the scene below him.

"Rustlers!" Judy said beside him. "Four of them; with our herd."

Ace was silent. A puzzled frown grew on his forehead as he watched the four men with the herd. A small mob of cattle had been drafted off from the main herd and was being driven in single file between two of the rustlers who sat their horses in the moonlight.

"Strange!" he muttered at last. "Now, why should rustlers do such a thing?"

Don Pesco always does just the opposite to what is expected of him," Judy said bitterly.

"You're mistaken about Pesco," Ace drawled; "those hombres down there are not Pesco's men."

Judy threw him a swift glance. "You seem to be on Pesco's side; you have a habit of speaking up for him. Almost as though you're trying to cover up for him. Come to think of it, you could be one of his men; we know nothing about you."

He didn't answer her question. "Take a look," he said. "If Pesco was bossing those rustlers they wouldn't be bothering to count the cattle they were rustling. See for yourself; they've cut one whiteface out from the rustled herd and turned it back to the main one. Now, why should rustlers worry about rustling an exact number. Those are no ordinary rustlers."

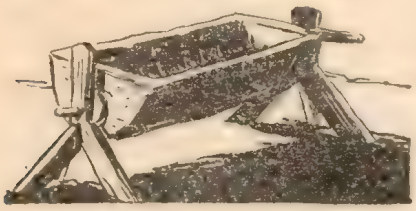
"What difference does it make," the girl snapped. "They're still rustlers, and they're getting away with our herd while we're standing here wondering why they're doing it." Turning

she darted swiftly toward her mount.

Taking three long strides, he caught her and his arms went about her slim, exciting body. "Where do you think you're going?"

"If you're not going to stop them for some reason of your own, then I am," she said coldly; "let me go."

He grinned down at her, but the grin didn't reach his eyes. "You're staying here. And if you're going to be stubborn about it, then I'll have to tie you to one of those rocks."



"You wouldn't dare, Ace Champion. If you put a rope on me, I—I'll scratch out your eyes."

"I believe you would, too." The smile left his voice. "I haven't much time to waste; sorry, Judy." His hand reached out for the rope on the saddle of Judy's mare.

"I—I'll stay," she said quickly. "But I—I hate you, Ace Champion."

"If you don't come back within the next couple of hours," he said grimly, "then ride straight for the ranch-house. Understand?"

She nodded. "Ace," her voice wasn't sharp now. "There're four of them."

"I'll figger something while I'm following them." He turned and walked over to the stallion.

•

He was swinging into the saddle when Judy flashed past him on the back of her mare, heading madly into the valley.

"Judy, you little fool, come back here." Checking a curse, Ace swung his mount about and raced after the slim figure. The bark of a .45 rang out and then came two sharp, savage replies. Ace forgot his anger then, forgot everything but that slim figure riding into those smoking guns.

He flashed into the moonlight, his right .45 spitting lead, not at anything or anyone in particular—the range was too long. The bark of his six-shooter was just to draw the rustler's attention—away from that slim figure over to the right. He succeeded. The speed of his stallion quickly took him within .45 range; lead snarled past him and snatched at his leather vest in passing.

He threw a swift glance in Judy's direction. She was still over to the right, but the gap between her and the rustlers was closing with alarming speed.

And just ahead of her, with his .45 swinging in her direction, sat a masked rustler on a prancing bronco.

Desperately, Ace turned in his saddle and snatched a slug in the direction. It was a hurried shot, but accurate; the slug jerked the rustler backward before it hurled him from the saddle.

Ace didn't know that, in falling, the rustler's foot had caught in the stirrup and that the startled mount was racing madly toward the main herd of whitefaces, the bouncing, lifeless thing at its heels driving it into frantic speed. Ace didn't have time to look at that riderless horse; searching slugs were driving at him coming too close. Pulling his mount to a halt, he drew his other .45 and triggered it into deadly life.

"Judy!" he tried to lift his voice above the sound of the six-shooters. "Judy, turn back; go back to the ranch." But if she heard, she took no notice; she drove her mount forward into those blazing guns.

A SAVAGE grin touched Ace's lips as a rustler, over to the left, doubled over in the saddle and clutched at the horn for support. Another slug drew a howl of pain from the third rustler who threw his hands to his face before turning his mount and racing it after the fourth rustler who was riding madly toward the opposite opening of the valley.

Thundering hoofs took the place of the now silent six-shooters. Ace swung in that direction and cold fear caught at him. The horse with the lifeless figure bouncing at its heels had stampeded the main herd of whitefaces into a mob of crashing, thundering hooves. And there, right in the path of that mad, wild mob, just rising from the ground where her mount had stumbled and thrown her, was Judy. The herd of whitefaces was now a cloud of dust within two hundred yards of the startled girl, gazing hopelessly at her mount which was racing madly in the opposite direction.

"Run, Judy. Run to the left." But Ace knew that his voice couldn't rise above the sound of those pounding hooves; he leant forward in the saddle and the black stallion stretched its powerful legs in reply.

And then Judy was before Ace, her white face turned toward him, her arms lifting above her head. Ace's right arm reached down and for a horrible moment he thought he had misjudged her distance but, with a suddenness which almost tore him from the saddle, the circle of his arm was filled by Judy's clinging form; he was putting her into the saddle in front of him, and she was pressing her face against the side of his neck.

The stallion was running in a direct line with the herd, now. Ace threw a glance over his shoulder. The extra weight was holding the stallion back; the leading whitefaces were no more than fifteen yards behind the stallion and closing the gap with every stride. There was only one chance left. Dropping the reins over the horn, Ace sent his right hand holsterward and it came up spitting lead. The leading whiteface dropped in its tracks as the slug entered its left eye. The steer on the left received the same treatment; it collapsed and was lost from view as its followers, unable to check their speed, went down in a bawling, kicking mass. And still those behind were pushed onward by the surging tons of flesh at their hindquarters. At last a gap appeared in the rushing wall of flesh as the wild eyed steers finally swerved to the right and the left to avoid that kicking, bawling heap.

And in that gap, Ace halted his mount, to watch the herd go pounding past on either side.

Ace lowered the trembling girl to the ground and sat watching the herd thundering across the valley in the moonlight, the dust like a heavy mist at their heels. He watched that mad mass of flesh until it came to a halt. Even then he didn't look at the girl. Turning his mount, he rode back up the valley and caught the sweating, trembling horse which had finally halted with its limp burden. Freeing the dead rustler from the stirrup, Ace looked into the battered, gory mass of flesh and bone which had once been a man's face.

Judy didn't say a word until she was in the saddle; she turned on him, then. "Why don't you cuss me? Go on; don't sit there saying nothing. Say, 'I told you so'."

He looked at her and his eyes narrowed as he saw that proud, defiant tilt of her chin in the moonlight. "I was going to forget your foolishness," he drawled grimly, "because I figgered you had been scared enough for one night. But I've decided to teach you a lesson. Get down; I'm going to tan the seat of those green levis."

"I will not," she flamed, her blue eyes returning his stare, a flush coloring her face. "I certainly will not, Ace Champion." Swiftly, she touched the stallion with a small heel.

ACE MADE no movement to follow her. He sat his mount, a cool grin on his lips. Judy was about a

hundred yards away, bent over in the saddle, before Ace moved. And even then he only shifted his weight in the saddle, and pursing his lips, sent out a long, sharp whistle.

But that was all that was necessary. The stallion turned sharply and cantered to where Ace was waiting. Despite his efforts to stop it, a low amused laugh issued from Ace as he watched Judy's futile, almost comical attempts to turn the stallion round in the opposite direction.

"Damn—damn you, Champion," Judy snapped as she threw the reins from her over the stallion's head. "Damn—damn you, and your stallion, too."

"That's no way for a lady to talk," he drawled. "That's another of the tricks I taught Blackie. You're lucky; he didn't throw you off because I gave you his reins. He's a one-man horse. He'll throw and trample anyone to death if I don't hand the reins to the rider." Dismounting, he stared up at her. "Now, about this spanking? Are you going to get down or will I have to lift you down?"

"Don't, don't you dare touch me, you—you coyote," she snapped. "Don't you dare." Her small hand dropped to the butt of her man-sized .45.

He grinned; it was a faint, amused grin. Reaching up, he lifted her from the saddle and then the soft, warm figure was cradled under one arm and he was slapping her soundly.

He put her on her feet finally and then stepped back. She had taken the spanking without a murmur, but now she gave her levis an angry twist and turned on him. Several times her red lips opened but no words came. And, when he grinned at her, she at last found her voice. "I—I hate you, Ace Champion. And if I were a man, I would gutshoot you. You—you..." she struggled for the appropriate words. "You—you hired gunslinger. Don't ever speak to me again."

Those words took the grin from his lips; they tightened into a taunt, grim line. He looked at her through narrowed lids. "Get on your mount," was all he said, as he swung into his saddle.

Slowly, she mounted and rode along behind him, staring at his back. But as she rode, the stiff lines of her slim figure relaxed and the anger died out of her eyes. Suddenly, she smiled and her eyes softened in the moonlight.

•

At the ranch-house, she said softly as he dismounted and would have turned away. "Where are your manners? Don't you ever help a lady to dismount?"

"Sorry," was all he said as she slid out of the saddle into his arms. She made no attempt to move out of the circle of his arms; instead, she seemed to snuggle a little closer as she touched his arm lightly.

"You risked your life back there to save mine," she said softly. "You might have been killed, and all because of my stubbornness. And I didn't even thank you. I'm sorry, cowboy, really I am for the things I said. But I acted the way I did because I thought you were going to let those rustlers get away without a fight. And you—you made me say those things when you—you spanked— You—you embarrassed me, cowboy."

The taut line about his mouth softened and he grinned at her. "Forget it," he drawled. "I shouldn't have acted the way I did; that was no way to treat a pretty lady." His grin widened. "I liked it, though." And when she opened her lips to say something, he stopped her words with his lips.

4

JUST AFTER dark the next night, Ace paid a visit to Westbar. Westbar was similar in appearance to many other small cow-towns of that period. Its dusty street was closely - packed on either side by a row of false-fronted buildings, which appeared as though they had been dumped there in the middle of the prairie by some mighty, hurried hand. Where the business part of Westbar ended, the residential part took over. This part, too, gave the appearance of having been dropped there and forgotten.

Ace dropped into the Sheriff's office and reported the events of the past few days. His visit was merely to check on whether or not Judy's and Castiron's summing up of the sheriff was correct. After five minutes of futile attempts to draw the wreck of a man into conversation, Ace left the office with the full belief that both Judy and her father were right.

During the conversation, Sheriff Rae had lifted his head once from the table, and that had been to enable him to raise a bottle to his thin, old lips.

"Judy's right, too, about Ranklin owning Westbar, Blackie," Ace muttered as he reined the stallion to a halt in front of Westbar; one hotel. "His name is plastered on every building in this town."

As Ace stepped through the swing-doors, and moved over towards the long bar at the left of the room, a painted dancehall girl caught his arm and tried to lead him toward a door on the right where a squeaky concertina was going full blast. The girl, a slim, pretty blonde muttered angrily as Ace turned politely away and eased over the bar where three men were drinking, their backs to him.

"Mighty particular, ain't you, stranger?" the percentage girl said, following him; "well, if you don't want to dance, then buy me a drink."

"Here, buy one for yourself," Ace drawled, tossing a coin which dropped neatly down the front of the low-cut dress.

The eyes in the painted face widened in sudden anger. A refusal was strange to her. Her over-red lips curved downward and the light from the swinging oil lamps revealed her heaving bosom. "It's not wise to refuse one of Ranklin's girls, stranger. If you know what's good for you, you'll buy that drink after we've had the dance—and drink it with me."

"Sorry, I'm not in the mood." Ace turned and breasted the bar.

"It's not polite to refuse a lady's invitation, senor," a surly voice at Ace's left snarled. "Have a drink with thee leetle lady."

Turning, Ace looked into a swarthy, long face from which a pair of dark, beady eyes stared into his. The man was a Mexican although he wasn't wearing the traditional dress of his people. The two men on his other side were Mexicans, too, and they, like their companion, were wearing the cowboy rigout. They were three of the meanest hombres Ace had ever set eyes on. The second, a tall thin man with a patch over one eye, was playing with a glass on the smooth surface of the bar. The third was a short, fat man with a round face which would have been jovial in appearance if it weren't for the long scar which extended from the left eye to the point of the second chin, pulling his mouth into a cruel line.

"If you're so plumb all-fired to please the lady, why don't *you* drink with her?" Ace's drawl was soft, but it reached to every corner of the room.

"The leetle lady asked you, senor," Long-Face said, stepping away from the bar, his hands brushing, as though from force of habit, the six-shooter on each hip.

Ace's movement was so slight that few in that room noticed it, but it was enough to clear his elbows of the bar. "Ranklin must do a roaring trade," he drawled, "with his hired gunslingers telling people where and how to spend their money."

"Ranklin; never heard of 'im," Long-Face said. "Thees town, she is strange to us, senor. Thee leetle lady is waiting."

"Go plumb to hell," Ace said softly. A slow grin touched his lips as he heard the shuffling of boots as the onlookers moved quickly out of firing line. "You hombres sure pick the long way round to start a fight."

Long-Face stepped backward, but his attempt to cover up the movement of the tall, thin man at his back failed. The other's gun didn't quite clear leather; Ace's right .45 spat lead the moment the round bore leaped from the holster, speaking from the hip. The victim didn't even feel any pain; a slug hit him smack between the eyes.

Long-Face's hand was a flashing blur as it smacked down and came up gunfilled, but the slug was wasted; Ace wasn't in the same place to receive it. His long legs had carried his body three feet to the right, a moment after his first slug had smashed the first man to the floor.

Long-Face made a fatal mistake by missing out on that first shot; he didn't get another chance. A .45 slug fired at close range can make an awful mess of a man's stomach, and that's where the slug from Ace's left .45 went; it doubled the man over before it drove him backward to the floor in a squirming, groaning heap.

Ace Champion might have been the third party readied for boothill in that hotel if the one with two chins had added his .45's to the fight. But when Ace swung his .45 in that direction, the third man was missing; the flapping doors of the hotel told of Double-Chin's hurried departure.

ACE RELOADED his .45's and dropped them back into their holsters. "Which outfit did those hombres work for?" he asked, facing the onlookers.

"They didn't work fer anyone in these parts, stranger." A short, fat hombre stepped out of the crowd. "They're strangers. They drifted in in here early this morning with two other Mexicans who was all bandaged up—as though they had been in one hell of a fight. It must have been a shooting-match because I heard the feller with the bandaged left hand mutter something to his companions about three missing fingers and 'ter hell with the cattle."

Ace's eyes narrowed; he figured he knew where that shooting match had taken place. "Thanks, feller. And the two with the bandages—did they quit town?"

"Nope;" the townsman was eager with his information. "Half an hour ago they were in the eating-house three doors down the street."

"Then if I'm not plumb mistaken, there are three hombres somewhere out there waiting for me to step out into the street," Ace muttered softly to himself as he stepped to the side of the swing-doors and looked cautiously into the dimly-lit street. "I..."

There came the sharp voice of a six-shooter and the shattering of glass. Behind Ace, the townsman who had been so free with his information gave a sharp gasp and sprawled his length across a table which collapsed beneath his weight.

Ace's .45's were in his hands as he parted the doors in one swift leap. He was running when he hit the wooden

sidewalk outside. Turning sharply to the right, he reached the corner of the hotel and flattened himself in the darkness of its wall.

From the other corner came the voice of a six-shooter and a flash of flame. Lifting his .45 slightly, Ace snapped a quick slug in that direction a moment after the slug had snarled past him to bury itself in the wall beside him. Turning, he answered a shot which came from a hidden six-shooter a little to the right. It released its speedy message of death the second time, and this time the cry was one of mortal agony. There came the soft thud of something striking the ground, then the faint sound, as that made by a bootheel scraping the ground, then silence.

Another victim was ready for boothill.

"Two to go," Ace muttered grimly. "This band of hombres are trying plumb hard to plant me in boothill. They're acting under someone's orders —but whose? First they tried to scare me away with a note; now that has failed, they are trying more drastic measures—and plumb convincing ones at that. Someone wants me out of the way. Why? Because I might stumble on to the real boss behind the trouble that is riding these parts? Someone is plumb anxious to keep everyone thinking that Don Pesco and his band are gun-rodding this range. Ranklin? But Ranklin's buying the land of the quitting cowmen and paying a fair price for it; why pay a fair price when the cowmen are set on leaving and will have to sell to someone, no matter how low the figure?"

Ace had been standing in the darkness of the building, thinking. It was a habit of his which he always fell into while waiting for something to happen. It stopped a man from being too eager, gave him something to occupy his mind while waiting for the other hombre to reveal his hand. Sooner or later, the other fellow would become impatient and curious; sometimes he would panic by wondering where his enemy was, what he was doing. Sooner or later he would reveal his place of ambush by some movement.

And it usually worked for Ace. It worked now; from the opposite corner of the building there came the faint jingle of spurs, then the sounds of boots pounding in the opposite direction along the side of the hotel. Obviously, the killer had figured that Ace had worked his way along the front of the hotel to the other end, in the hope of coming up behind his enemy.

Ace bent down and removed his spurs; hooking them over his gunbelt, he made his way softly along the wall to the opposite corner of the wall and halted. Reaching cautiously round the corner, he scraped the wall gently with the butt of his .45 and then quickly drew back. And just in time; slugs whistled angrily past the corner and one buried itself in the timber near his ear.

The man was still triggering his weapon at the other end of the building when Ace dropped to his stomach and inched his way softly along the wall to the corner of the building. Calmly, he triggered his two .45's at a flash of flame as the ambusher fired his six-shooter, foolishly. Those two shots were all that Ace needed; from the other end of the building came a blood-muffled gurgle and a faint sound as that of a body sliding down the wall.

"Damn—damn you, Champion." The voice from the darkness was almost a gurgle, as though the speaker was trying to force the words through a mouthful of blood. "I—I'm dying."

ACE KNEW by the sound of that voice that it wasn't a trick to make him reveal himself, but he *had* seen dying men rally enough to drive home one desperate, fatal shot. Moving forward cautiously, he made his slow way to the man, but he kept in

the darkness of the building and not too close to the wall itself.

"Damn—damn you, Champion," the renegade said again as Ace touched him in the darkness. "Things were all right until you—you hit these parts, you—you tricky devil. I—I should have kept going after I ran out of the hotel. But the—the game's not played yet. If Pedro doesn't get—get you, then the—the big boss, or one of the boys, will."

"Pedro?" Ace bent low over the man. "Is that the name of your other pal who's waiting to plant a slug through me somewhere out here?"

"*Si,* senor. You won't get away; Pedro's sharp." The voice was now a whisper.

Ace's voice grew soft. "You'll be facing your Maker soon now, feller; wouldn't you like to have a clear bill of sale when you meet him?"

"*Si,* senor." There was a desperate, pleading note in the other's voice. "*Si,* senor."

As Ace heard the dying man's voice, he found it hard to make himself go on with what he had in mind. But he forced himself to continue. "Square yourself by telling me what I want to know, so as I can clear the range of the rattlesnake who's causing all the trouble."

"Senor Champion, you don't know what you're asking!"

"How did you know my name? I've never met you before, *amigo.*"

"Pedro told me, senor; Pedro met you before, senor."

"Where?" Ace's voice was still sharp. "In Don Pesco's hideout?"

"*Si,* senor." The Mexican gave a convulsive shudder. "Big boss sent us to kill you when Pedro recognised you."

"Who sent you gunning for me, *amigo?*" Ace asked quickly, sharply, as he sensed the life easing from the figure under his hand. "Quickly, *amigo*; who's the big boss?"

"The big boss." Fear hadn't been in the weak voice until now. "No, no, *senor;* the big boss would kill me."

"*Amigo,*" Ace rasped. "You're dying, *amigo*; the big boss won't be able to hurt you. His name, quickly, *amigo.*"

But the other Mexican didn't reply.

"Lopez," a voice called softly from an alley behind Ace. "Lopez, did you get 'em?"

"*Si,* Pedro," Ace replied, imitating the voice of the dead one. "*Si,* senor. Over here."

Pedro left the valley at a run. "You did a good job, Lopez. Just as well; I wouldn't have liked the job of telling the boss that Champion got away. I hope the boss hasn't any more jobs like this one for us ter do. That Champion hombre was too damn slick with his smokepoles. Lopez, where are yer? I can't see yer in this damn darkness. I'm glad..." Pedro didn't complete the sentence; not because he thought it would be a waste of words for him to say more, but because the hard bore of a .45 was pressing into his stomach and Champion's voice was hissing in his ear, "Freeze, Pedro."

"I'll take these," Ace drawled as he lifted the .45's from Pedro's holsters. "And now, Pedro, let's move over to a light so as I can see your ugly face. Lopez gave me some information before he cashed in his chips, but it wasn't enough. I want some more, and you're going to give it to me, Pedro."

"Yer're wasting yer time, Champion," Pedro muttered. "You won't get anything out of me. I won't talk."

"You'll talk, *amigo,*" Ace said grimly, shoving the .45 into the man's back. "To the front of the hotel, Pedro. Pronto."

Under the light of the oil lamp, Ace looked into the other's face which was almost covered by bandages. Ace drawled. "So, Don Pesco finally kicked you out of his gang. Now I can understand why you hombres were so plumb set on trying to plant me in boothill."

"I don't know what yer talking about, Champion," the half-breed muttered.

"All right, start talking," Ace dug the .45 hard into the man's stomach. "Who are you gunslinging for now? Who's the big boss?"

Pedro stiffened and Ace knew that he paled beneath the bandages. "Yer way off the track, Champion; I'm still with Pesco."

"Liar!" Ace's voice was like a whip crack. But the sound wasn't as sharp as the crack which his open hand made as it struck the half-breed's face, just below the bandages. The blow sent the other sprawling into the dust of the street. "Liar! Start talking, hombre. Pronto. You recognized me, told your boss that I knew the real Pesco and wouldn't fall for the yarn that he, Pesco, is behind all the trouble that is riding this range. You were one of the skunks who attacked Miss Judy, the other day; and you were also one of the rustlers. You recognized me, told your big boss, and he decided that I had to die before I stampeded the whole works. Don't waste time trying to deny it, Pedro; you're carrying my bullet-brand under those bandages right now. Who's the brains bossing you? *Pronto,* Pedro."

"Blast you, Champion," Pedro muttered from the dust. "I'm telling the truth; I'm still in Pesco's band. Pesco's running short of beef and we're rustling a few steers to keep us eating."

"I might have believed that if it weren't for the killings. And Pesco doesn't turn his guns on women. You're still lying, Pedro, and I don't like it."

"Hell, Champion, can't yer see when a hombre's telling the truth? Pesco's desperate; he hasn't taken any easy money since yer were in the hideout. He had ter do something. His men are pushing 'im."

"Pesco's men will follow him through fire, Pedro, and you know it." Ace's voice was still the same slow drawl, but the tone of his voice was cold. "Pedro, have you ever seen a man die through a slug in the belly? It's not a very pleasant sight. You have just ten seconds to start talking."

The part of the other's face which wasn't covered by bandages turned a ghastly color in the light of the oil lamps swinging over his head. He passed his tongue over his lips, and his eyes widened in horror; then a crafty expression spread over his features. "Yer wouldn't shoot an unheeled man, Champion."

Ace didn't pay any attention to the gathering crowd. Holstering his .45, he bent and lifted the half-breed by the front of his shirt. "You're right; I couldn't shoot even a skunk like you without giving him a chance. But I'm going to make you talk, Pedro, even if I have to belt the daylights out of your yellow-livered soul. A skunk who turns his smokepoles on women doesn't deserve any pity." Ace hit the other sharply across the left side of his face, twice. Then, releasing him, he stepped back, his hand bunched at his sides. "All right, Pedro. We'll see if you can take it. You never did have any sand in your claws."

"You can go ter hell, Champion."

PEDRO came in with fists swinging, head down, like a charging bull. His head didn't stay down long. Ace doubled him over with a solid punch to the stomach and then he straightened that head. He jerked it upward with a swift right to the chin; that blow lifted the renegade upward and backward; it smashed him back to the dust and turned his face up at the swinging lamps.

But Pedro wasn't out. Ace hadn't intended him to be. Those blows had been just to make him mad—talking mad. Some men are apt to blow their guts when in anger, but it didn't work with Pedro; he came to his feet, his lips twisting in a snarl.

And his hand was clutching a bowie-knife. That knife flashed in the lamplight before it left Pedro's hand, its wicked blade a silver line of light as it hurled on its way.

Ace didn't have much time to act. He took a desperate, almost-hopeless chance. He dropped to his knees, his flesh tensing for the feel of cold steel. But it didn't come; either luck was riding with Ace or Pedro's aim was poor. Whatever it was, it saved Ace; he heard the faint whisper of sound as the knife flashed past his left ear.

The renegade turned to run when he saw the knife miss its mark. He didn't get far; Ace came up from his knees in a flying tackle. Pedro hit the ground, face down. He didn't stay down long; he was lifted roughly to his feet. He tried to say something through the dust in his mouth, and it wasn't only the dust which turned his words into a mumble. He couldn't talk because Ace was shaking him, just as a huge dog will shake a coyote.

From his belt Ace jerked Pedro's .45's and shoved them into the renegade's holsters. He stepped back then, his own huge hands swinging freely near the butts of his six-shooters.

"You're heeled again, now, Pedro." Ace's voice was terrible in its very softness. "Draw!"

"No, Champion. Wait!" Pedro stepped backward, his hands lifting shoulder high. "Champion, don't!"

"You have five seconds to jerk your smokepipes; at the count of five, I'm going to kill you."

"Champion, yer can't. I'm no match for yer guns."

"One—"

"It'll be murder, Champion; the crowd won't stand fer—"

"Two—"

"For gawd's sake, Champion—"

"Three. No; don't try it; if you try to run, I'll drill you through the thighs. Four—"

"Wait, Champion. Wait." The beads of sweat were plain on Pedro's forehead. "Don' shoot, Champion. Damn yer, what do yer want ter know? I'll talk."

"Just one thing, Pedro. Who's the brains giving you your orders? Who is the false Pesco?"

Pedro glanced fearfully into the crowd. Then his eyes returned to the grim-eyed man before him. There was fear in Pedro's eyes, real, desperate fear. It turned the renegade into a quivering wreck of a man.

"Yer don't know what yer asking me ter do, Champion. My life wouldn't be worth a dead coyote if I told yer that. Fer gawd's sake, Champion, anything but that."

"You'll die anyway, Pedro; right here." Ace dropped his hands to the butts of his .45's. "Take your choice."

"Champion, wait! I'll tell yer what yer want ter know if yer promise to see me safely out of these parts, tonight."

"You're not in any position to drive a bargain, Pedro, but it's a deal. Hurry; my trigger-fingers are becoming a mite itchy."

Pedro glanced fearfully at the crowd. He seemed to search each face in turn before he turned back to Ace and leant close, his lips almost touching Ace's left ear. "The big boss—"

Pedro didn't say any more; he didn't even grunt as a .45 cracked and cut off his words, sending him to the ground in a limp, still heap.

Ace whirled, his .45's leaping into his hands, but he didn't fire. He reholstered his six-shooters and turned slowly toward the hotel, his ears listening to the pounding hoofs which were carrying the killer out of town in the darkness.

5

DAWN OF the new day was grey in the sky as Ace turned the stallion away from the H-in-a-circle ranch-house, in the direction of the valley where he had first met Judy. As he approached the spot, he pulled his mount to a slow walk, his eyes searching the rim of the valley on both sides. He was within twenty yards of the spot where the men had taken cover behind the rocks, when a rifle cracked and a bullet fanned the back of his neck. His hands went holsterward, but they didn't lift the .45's. The hidden rifle spat again. Ace felt the soft, sickening impact of the bullet against the side of his neck, the tearing, hurting wrench of lead biting into soft flesh. Then he was falling. He relaxed before he hit the rocky floor of the valley and tried to turn himself out of that headlong plunge, but the distance was too short; the back of his head struck the rocky floor and blackness rushed over him.

"Got him," a voice yelled from the rim. "The boss will be pleased when he hears the news. I knew if we waited long enough he would come this way, but I didn't expect it ter be so soon. Hurry, yer hombres. Let's get 'im on his hoss and get away from here."

"Watch yerself," another voice said a few yards further along the rim. "He's a tricky devil and he can make those smoke-poles talk."

"Don't be a fool," the first voice snapped. "I drilled 'im dead centre. Come on."

"Drilled 'im dead centre; like hell. He's just out ter it. Yer a rotten shot." Rough hands seized Ace and tied him across the saddle.

The sky was swaying in jerky movements and there was a dark cloud before Ace's eyes when he opened them. He looked more closely through his painfilled orbs. It wasn't the sky, and that dark object wasn't a cloud; it was the shadow of a horse. Ace was tied facedown in the saddle with his head and arms on one side and his legs on the other. He was sore and stiff; pain was like a hot iron against the side of his neck and he could feel the caked blood which covered one side of his face. He tried to move to a more comfortable position, failed and then relaxed his bunched muscles.

There were other horses at hand; he could tell that by the smell and the sound of their nostrils blowing and nickering. He tried to forget pain and to concentrate on the events leading to the present moment. He knew that he couldn't have been unconscious for more than half an hour; what he could see of the country from his uncomfortable position proved that fact. He was still in the valley. He knew the length of that valley; it was a little over a mile long. One end opened on to the open country in the direction of the H-in-a-circle ranch house and the opposite end fanned out and disappeared into the badlands.

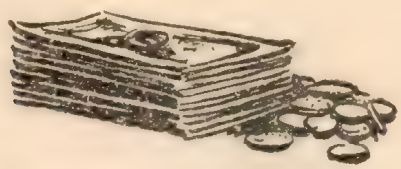
He wondered who the men were, and where he was being taken. Of one thing, he was sure; wherever he was heading was not going to be a place to his liking or comfort.

There were three other horses beside his own—he could tell by the sounds of hoofbeats. He wondered idly if each horse had a rider? He tried the rope which bound him; but the job had been done by expert hands.

He stiffened as a surly voice muttered.

"Yer're one hell of a shot with a rifle, Clem. If I hadn't stepped in and drilled him, we'd still be fighting it out back there. And I ain't hankering fer that none. He's like greased lightning with his irons. We had a sample of that yesterday."

"Aw, hell," the man called Clem snapped. "The blasted sun was in me eyes and me left arm is useless. I wouldn't have missed with the second slug. Yer've nothing ter brag about. Your shot only knocked him cold. Now we've still got him on our hands. The boss said...."



"Shut up yer pair," another voice snapped. "Keep your mouths shut."

"Aw, what does it matter?" Clem replied. "The skunk's out cold. If he's not, he'll damn soon be. I'll teach him not ter slug me." Ace heard no more, through heavy eyes he watched a horse's legs move toward him; the next moment a heavy weight crashed against the back of his head and darkness rushed over him.

•

When he opened his eyes again, he was sitting with his back against a large rock and the mid-day sun was trying to burn a hole through the top of his bare head. His first real movement was an attempt to lift his hand to his head where pain was hammering away at the back of his skull. The attempt failed; he was tied hands and feet. With an effort, he lifted his head. He was in a small valley; the scenery was ugly, fantastic. There wasn't a green leaf or a green blade of grass in the whole rock-encircled valley. Tree-trunks stood, black and grey, rising above the dry, rustling grasses. It was gaunt, desolate and naked.

Voices came to Ace; they were behind the rock at his back. "Hell, let's get this job over with. This damn sun is burnin' a hole through me hide."

"Fer gawd's sake stop yer grumbling. If yer don't like the boss' orders, why don't yer tell him so? What's wrong with yer, Clem?"

"Aw, it's all right fer him to give orders," Clem snapped. "We do all the dirty work and get shot up while he sit..."

"Shut yer trap, Clem." Another voice cut in. "Yer getting well-paid."

"I don't reckon we're getting a fair cut," Clem replied. "The boss gives us the dogies, but he gets the..."

"Shut up, yer fool!" The third voice snapped. "Let's go see if Champion has come to yet. And fer gawd's sake keep yer mouths shut."

"Aw, what does it matter what he hears?" Clem grunted. "He's not going to be around ter tell anyone. Anyway, the boss didn't say ter go ter all this trouble. He just said ter get rid of Champion; this is your idea."

A boot kicked Ace in the ribs; he grunted and looked up at the owner of the boot. He was a burly, mean-faced individual. His nose was a flat lump of flesh above a sneering mouth and sharp, beard-covered chin. His eyes were coal-black and his black, bushy brows made one straight, unbroken line above them. As he moved backward, Ace noticed that the left arm was in a crude sling.

"Let's get ter work." The speaker was a little over six feet tall and as straight as a gun-barrel. His dark face was a mass of scars, some old and some recently-healed, and his dark hair hung almost to his shoulders. At his right stood a short, lean man whose dark eyes blazed hate at Ace from beneath a mass of dark, unkempt hair.

"Someday we'll meet again, fellers," Ace drawled softly. "And I hope it'll be soon."

"Empty words, Champion," Scarface snapped. He turned away. "All right, boys, fetch him over here."

ROUGH hands seized Ace and carried him to the other side of the rock where he was dumped roughly on the ground near a heap of fresh earth on which a spade rested. Ace looked more closely. Near the heap of earth was a round hole into which a round stake had been driven. These things were still registering in his pain-dulled sight when he was lifted and dumped into the hole, his chin just level with the top of the round grave. Swift, rough hands seized his arms and drew them to the stake and a rope bit cruelly into their flesh. In the same manner, his legs were bound to the stake and then the three men were looking down at him, sneering.

"All right, Clem," Scarface snapped. "Yer may have the pleasure of planting our sunflower. But only ter his chin. We don't want ter keep the sun off him; he mightn't blossom. And besides, we don't want ter rile the buzzards by cheating them out of a meal. Hell, I fergot about your arm, Clem. Cliff, yer do it." His voice rose. "Hurry, we don't want ter waste all day."

Ace's jaws tightened and his eyes narrowed as he fought to calm his mounting anger. They would like to hear him curse them, swear at them until the anger finally gave way to pitiful pleadings. Ace had seen many strong, fearless men turn into pitiful, begging wrecks as the smouldering anger took control. Anger was like that. It turned a man into a wild, heartless monster which, when unable to release its anger on its tormentor, finally broke beneath the strain and became a pitiful, begging thing. With this thought in his mind, Ace forced his voice to calmness as he drawled:

"This is your round, skunks, but there's another round to be played yet. And I'll plumb welcome it." Turning his head, he gazed at his black stallion which was ground-tied with three other horses. Without another word, he watched each spadeful of red, rock-mingled dirt as it was placed around him.

"Just ter show yer that we have no ill feelings terward yer, we'll leave yer some drinking water," Scarface said as he walked over to the horses and returned with three quart-pots which he placed within three feet of Ace's mouth. "There's some nice, cool water—if yer can reach it. And we'll even leave yer the spade, too, ter dig yerself out—if yer can reach that, too."

"Why are you skunks doing this?" Ace drawled.

A sneer twisted Scarface's lips. "Because we don't want yer to go thirsty, that's why. We're soft-hearted."

Ace ignored the grim humor in the voice. "Who's giving you orders, and why?"

Clem opened his mouth to speak, but Scarface snapped, "Shut yer trap, Clem."

"Aw, what does it matter?" Clem muttered. "He ain't going ter tell anyone."

"When a man's curiosity hasn't been satisfied," Scarface snapped, "he suffers more; and I want Champion ter suffer the fires of hell. He'll regret the day he drilled me mate between the eyes and blew away the top of me ear. He'll wish he had stayed out of something which is none of his concern."

"So you were in the valley yesterday and you were also one of the skunks who attacked the ranch-house that night?" Ace muttered. "Why did you want the girl? For ransom?"

"We were just throwing a scare into

the lady," Scarface sneered. "Then when you came along, we thought we'd give you the same treatment. Not that the facts are going ter do you much good."

"Don Pesco doesn't make war on women." Ace muttered. "It sure must be handy to have some one to take the blame for your crimes." Ace was really asking questions, but they went unanswered. Scarface turned and walked away. "Come on," he snapped. "Let's get going." He looked over his shoulder and grinned at Ace. "Sorry, we can't leave your stallion, but the big boss wants him." Still grinning, Scarface mounted his own horse, and, leading the stallion, led his two men in the general direction of the H-in-a-circle ranch.

ACE CHAMPION found it hard to fight down the feeling of utter helplessness which rose in his chest as he watched the stallion being led away. With the going of the stallion also went his one and only hope of rescue. An old-timer had once said of the stallion. "Give that stallion a pair of hands and he'd be as smart as most men, young feller." He had spoken the truth. Ace had taught the stallion many tricks and the stallion had learnt them quickly. Those tricks would be very useful now, but the stallion was just a black dot in the distance, disappearing into the hills.

It was Ace's stubborn streak and smouldering anger which helped him to fight down the feeling of hopelessness which threatened to overwhelm him. Carefully, he kept his eyes averted from those three quart-pots of water which sparkled under the blistering rays of the sun. He passed his tongue over his dry lips and sucked his palate in an attempt to fetch moisture to his mouth; it was a futile attempt. He glanced up at the sun and was surprised at the hours that had passed since the three men had disappeared into the foothills.

"About three o'clock," his voice was a hoarse croak.

A shadow fell across his face, another and another. He glanced up and could not still the shudder which passed over him. Hovering in the air above him, their short, curved bills, hooked at their tips, long wings, long tarsi and short, weak toes a threatening sight, were three buzzards. So close were they that he could see their greedy, cruel eyes watching him as they circled lower and lower.

For the man who was buried alive, time went slowly; seconds seemed like minutes and the minutes, in turn, seem to drag into hours. The sun shone down on his bare head and parched his lips and throat. One of the buzzards, more brazen than its mates, dropped on to the rock a few yards from Ace. Its beady eyes stared at Ace and it dropped to the ground, its short, curved bill reaching out.

Despite himself, Ace shuddered. He had seen several dead men after the buzzards had feasted on them; the eyes had been pecked out, and the flesh had been stripped from the bodies, leaving the bones to bleach in the scorching sun. Some of those men were still alive when the curved bills attacked them. Again he shuddered and then he lifted his voice in a shout which startled the bird into motion. But it didn't move far; it retreated a few feet and then stood looking at him, its long wings folded close to its body. Its two mates, hunger overcoming their fear, also dropped down and stood regarding Ace out of beady eyes.

The sun dropped slowly now. Again and again Ace frightened the buzzards off by lifting his voice in a shout and as the hours moved on the very vibration of his forced shouts rasped his throat. The sun blazed down on his head and cracked his lips. Calling on all his willpower, he kept his eyes averted from the three pots of water, realizing that the inviting sparkle of the water would increase his burning thirst.

And then the darkness, merciful and relieving, closed slowly in, enveloping the valley and the distant hills in a dark cloud which finally turned light as the moon rose over the hills, filling the desolate valley with a weird, breath-taking beauty.

It was then that Ace breathed a sigh of relief. The three buzzards, startled by another desperate, lifting shout, spread their long wings and rose into the air. Ace watched them go, watched them pass darkly toward the moon. But he knew they would be back; daylight would see them again, waiting, watching, and next time, as the trapped man's voice grew weaker, when his head could no longer move away from their hooked beaks, they would become more brazen.

In an attempt to reserve his strength, Ace gave way to broken slumber. Once, during the night, he heard the sound of hooves which were heading in the direction of the Pesco mountains. He was about to raise his voice in a cry for help when he heard Scarface's rough laugh. Ace's eyes narrowed in the moonlight and a grin split his cracked lips as Scarface growled, "That damn stallion is a killer. He tried to trample the boss after it threw him, and it would have did, too, if me and one of the boys hadn't went to his help. As it was, that damn stallion broke the boss' arm. Gawd knows where that damn killer is now."

Another voice which Ace recognised as Clem's cut in, "Aren't we going over ter have a look at Champion?"

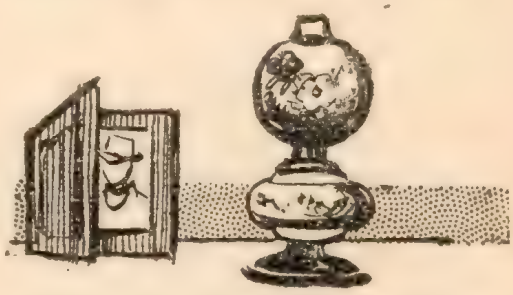
"Ter the devil with Champion?" Scarface snapped. "We haven't time ter waste on him; we'll get this job over first."

Ace grinned as the voices faded away in the distance. With the stallion free there was something to grin about even though dry and cracked lips pained in protest. By counting the stars which twinkled in the clear sky, Ace forced sleep to blank out his senses.

●

The moon was directly overhead when he was awakened by a low whinny, and by the touch of something soft against his face. He opened his eyes and grinned at the black stallion. "Blackie, you black devil," he said. "So they couldn't ride you, boy. Plumb mean of me not to tell them that you're a one-man horse. Blackie, you're a sight for these buzzard-bait eyes of mine.

"Careful, Blackie, careful boy," Ace muttered softly. "Don't knock over that pot of water." His voice grew deep with command. "My billy, Blackie. Fetch it over, boy. Careful, Blackie, careful, old fellow. Just like you've done many times when I asked you to move it closer to the fire. Only more careful, this time, fellow. I won't be able to refill it if you drop it." Ace held his breath as the stallion caught the rim of the quart-pot between its strong teeth and, lifting it a few inches, walked slowly forward and placed the quart-pot within easy reach of Ace's lips.



"Thanks, old fellow." Catching the rim of the pot between his white teeth, Ace tilted it slowly; the water, though still warm from the heat of the sun, had a soothing power as he trapped a mouthful, rolled it about with his tongue and then let it trickle slowly down his parched throat.

"Sorry to have to send you away so soon, Blackie," Ace said at last. "But I'm sure not hankering to spend the rest of my short life like this." Again his voice grew deep with command. "Go to the nice, purty lady. Understand, Blackie? The nice, purty lady?

Lady. Understand? Understand—lady?"

The stallion nickered softly and arched its powerful neck. Ace grinned. "Away with you, old fellow." Again Ace's cracked and sore lips split in a grin as the stallion turned quickly and, stretching its long, powerful legs, raced away in the direction of the H-in-a-circle ranch.

Ace was not sure whether he closed his eyes again that night, but suddenly the first grey streaks of dawn were in the sky; after awhile, the sun rose and with it saw the return of the buzzards. Their large wings made a slight sound as the birds dropped lightly to earth within a few feet of Ace and stood looking at him. Dropping his chin as low as possible, Ace waited until the buzzards were too close for comfort, their curved bills reaching out. Suddenly, he raised his head and gave a loud shout; with startled cries, the birds, startled by the unexpected movement and sound, winged into the air. But within a few minutes they were back, waiting, watching.

6

IT TAKES all that a man has in the way of strength and willpower to endure such physical suffering without showing some signs of breaking under the strain. Ace Champion had what it takes. Despite his uncomfortable position and the pain of his injuries, Ace succeeded in holding on to his sanity. As the sun rose higher, its rays scorching the back of his neck and his face, he drank sparely from the quart-pot, the water of which was now so dangerously low. And all the while he kept the buzzards at bay by lifting his voice, every now and then, in a loud shout.

"You devils," he muttered once, "I'm far from being dead yet."

The sun was four hours high when he heard the sound of hooves. Coming up the valley, its glossy hide shining in the sun, its powerful hooves pounding the trail into dust, was the black stallion. And riding swiftly behind it on a pinto horse, was Judy. Ace grinned. It was a slow, pleased grin, but in his pain-filled eyes there was an expression of impatient, terrible anger.

Ace Champion was in a killing mood.

Judy Morgan pulled her horse to a rearing halt as the black stallion halted within a few feet of Ace and arched its powerful neck before it stepped forward and muzzled his face. With puzzlement on her pretty face, Judy dismounted and stared about.

Ace called softly, "Over here, Judy."

The girl said, "Oh!" when she saw him. She faltered back a step, one hand going to her face which had turned white. For a few moments she stood regarding him, her blue eyes mirroring her horror and surprise. She moved forward and dropped on her knees before him, one slim hand resting on the earth near his chin. "Oh!" she said again.

"That's what I said when they put this blanket around me yesterday," Ace said, ironically; "but it didn't do me much good."

Judy looked at his cracked lips, then threw a look westward where the buzzards were just faint specks in the sky. Rising, she ran lightly over to her horse and returned with a water flask which she pressed gently to Ace's lips. He drank the water, not because he really needed it, but because it seemed to taste so much nicer coming from her. He would have emptied the flask if she hadn't gently pulled it away from his lips.

She had recovered her poise now, and was looking at him. But in her eyes was lurking dark, sombre shadows of sadness. Brushing the red dirt

from her buckskin skirt, she said, "I thought you had decided to save your own skin when I couldn't find you about the ranch."

Ace blushed a deep red when she said that, but his own voice was humorous as he grinned and replied, "I don't know if you have ever used a spade, Judy, but it looks like you're going to put a few blisters on those purty hands if I'm to be got out of this hole."

It was the girl who blushed now. She added quickly, "You do look comical with just your head sticking out of the earth." Despite herself, she gave a musical laugh.

Ace liked the way she laughed; he liked the face she pulled at him as he grinned and said. "I'll have to get myself in this kind of predicament more often, Judy. You need more practice with that spade. It looks like you're going to do a heap of digging. I'm tied to a stake—hands and feet."

She was silent for a while as she worked with the spade, and that dark, sombre shadow was back in her blue eyes. At last, she asked, "Who did this?" And as she worked, Ace told her all that had occurred since his departure from the ranch the morning previous.

AT LAST he lifted himself from the hole, but his legs refused to support him. He grinned up at her as she bent over him, a look of concern crossing her face. Without a word, she rose and went over to her horse, turned her back and tore a strip of white material from her underclothing before returning to his side. Still without a word, she washed and bandaged his neck wound. Then she stepped back, and that dark, sombre shadow was plain in her eyes.

"Dad was kidnapped last night," she said simply. Ace looked at her, shocked. She went on, "I—I went into his room early this morning and I found the note. They're asking 20,000 dollars ransom. When I couldn't find you about the ranch I went over to Ranklin's ranch; I had just arrived back when I met your stallion."

Ace forgot about his weak legs. He was on his feet, his strong hands clutching her shoulders. "What are you saying, Judy?" His voice sank to a grim note. "And what is Ranklin doing about it? Is he out searching?"

She gasped, "You're hurting me, Ace. No; he was still at the ranch when I left. He said that it's best that we obey the note. It said that if any attempt was made to find my father, he—he won't return alive."

Ace thought, *Ranklin knows that those devils will not turn Castiron free, even after they get the money.* Aloud he asked, "How is the ransom to be delivered?"

Judy said slowly, "The money is to be taken into the Pesco mountains sometime within the next three days and given to some men who will be waiting out there somewhere. The note didn't say where; Carl is sending one of his men to deliver the ransom."

"Twenty thousand dollars," Ace said softly. "That's a heap of mortgage, Judy."

She hesitated, blushed and turned from him. Then, "I'm not going to mortgage the ranch. I—I'm marrying Carl day after tomorrow."

Turning her savagely, he snapped. "Judy, you can't do that. I won't let you!"

"Why not?" she said swiftly. "It's better than having a mortgage on the ranch."

His hands dropped to his side. His eyes searched hers. She saw the shocked surprise in his eyes, the faint flicker of mounting disgust; but he didn't see the tears which were swelling at the back of her own.

"I always thought there were some things money couldn't buy. I was wrong."

There was no anger in her voice, and he was too angry and shocked to notice the low sob in her voice as she tossed her head and said, "It won't be a bad bargain. After I'm married to Carl, I'll have some peace. Carl is too powerful for Don Pesco. The H-in-a-circle herd will be able to graze peacefully."

"Oh, I see!" His voice was harsh. bitter. "I guess I was plumb wrong about a heap of things. Well, mam, I guess I'll mosey along."

"The wedding, Ace," she murmured softly, quickly; "you're invited."

His eyes hardened. "Thanks, but I'll mosey along. You won't need me any longer, mam. Anyway, these parts are unhealthy at the moment. So long, mam."

"Oh, I see!" Her red lips twisted scornfully. "Hurry, cowboy. Scarface might return, and I wouldn't want you to get hurt on my account."

Without a word, he stepped forward and swept her into his savage embrace. For a long moment he held her tightly, his lips pressing against hers. Suddenly, he released her and stepped backwards, his right hand going to the front pocket of his jeans. Sunlight flashed on the dollar in his hand and then, with a twist of his wrist, the dollar was at her feet and a twisted grin was on his lips as he drawled, "The price of the kiss. mam." Without another word, he buckled on the gunbelt which had been dropped over the saddle-horn; mounted, and turned the stallion in the direction of the Pesco mountains.

Judy stood where he had left her. With misty eyes she stared after him. She raised one hand and pressed it to the lips he had kissed. She took a step forward, her lips framed his name, then slowly she turned toward her horse.

"Cowboy," she whispered as she mounted. "Cowboy, I'm sorry."

•

ACE DID not look back at the slim girl who was staring after him. His lips were a thin, straight line as he found the trail which Scarface and his men had left during the night. Lifting the stallion into a canter, Ace rode for a couple of hours with scarcely a break, following the easy-read trail which the horses had left in the soft, hoof-powdered earth of the badlands.

It still lacked two hours to sundown when he reached the foothills of the Pesco Mountains. Another trail forked off the main trail here. The left fork turned abruptly to the right, following the foothills of the Pesco Mountains; the other, along which many horses had recently travelled, headed directly into the mountains. Ace took this trail. The ground underfoot became rocky as he started the long climb upward and he had to pull the stallion to a slow walk in order to follow the faint trail which the riders had left. At times, when large rocks and thick bush barred his path and he had to make a choice as to which direction to take, he found it necessary to dismount and to search the rocky surface for signs of Scarface's passing. But he clung to the trail. An overturned stone, a dropped, charred match, a sodden cigarette butt, faint, shiny hoof scratches and fresh horse droppings were the signs for which his experienced eyes searched and found.

The sun dropped lower with alarming speed and darkness would soon be pushing its shadows forward. Suddenly, Ace pulled the stallion to a halt; the faint trail had disappeared completely, suddenly. Dismounting, Ace looked about, but all he could see on either side were large rocks

and thick bush. His mind registered that fact as he rolled and lit a cigarette.

At last he ground the cigarette-butt beneath the heel of his boot and walked slowly to the left, his right hand brushing the butt of his .45.

A range-bred man has an alert sixth-sense which comes to his rescue when the going is full of danger. This sixth-sense warned Ace now. He was walking slowly forward, pushing his way between the rocks and thick bush when suddenly he gave a low whistle of surprise and stepped quickly backward, his hand reaching out and clawing at the rough edge of a rock at his side.

"That was a close call," he muttered as he sank to his knees and looked downward. The rocky surface for which his outstretched boot had searched was no longer there; it dropped straight downward without even a slight bulge in its smooth side and it came to an abrupt halt on the valley floor two hundred feet below.

Ace let his eyes rove over the valley. The valley was no more than a quarter of a mile wide and it was as long as it was wide. The perpendicular cliffs surrounding it were the same as the one which dropped so abruptly at Ace's feet. The valley was more like a large, rock-dotted basin whose rocky floor had scorned the shade of trees, the only trees being the few cottonwoods which grew near the row of shacks in its centre. Not even a blade of grass was visible to Ace as he gazed down into the valley.

But there was sign of life. The door of one of the shacks opened and a figure stepped into view. Ace's eyes narrowed as he recognised the features of the man he had come to know only as Scarface. Even as Ace watched, another figure moved into view; he, in turn, was joined by eight more men who came from behind the second shack behind which Ace guessed the horse-corral to be.

"Nine," Ace muttered. "And I'm willing to bet that that's where Castiron is being held. In fact, I'm plumb willing to gamble my life on that." His hand went to his .45, but he didn't lift it from its holster. Instead, he drew back from the rim of the basin and followed along it until he found the steep track leading down to the basin's floor. Satisfied at last, he walked back to the stallion, mounted, and rode deeper into the Pesco mountains.

Ace knew where he was going now. He kept the stallion at a swift walk until the moon rose, then he pushed forward at a mile-eating pace.

THREE HOURS later, Ace pulled the stallion to a halt. Towering above him was the highest peak of the Pesco mountains. Dismounting, he started the steep climb upward, the stallion stepping nimbly at his heels. Several times Ace paused and rested for a few minutes before continuing the arduous climb. Finally, when he was about fifty feet from the top, he sank thankfully on to a small rock and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He rolled and lit a cigarette then, with a grin on his lips, he drew his .45 from its holster and fired twice into the air. Holstering the weapon, he sank again on to the rock, the grin still on his lips.

The echo was still in the mountains when a voice with a Mexican accent said from higher up the mountain. "You've been under the sights of my rifle for half an hour, *senor*. What's your business?"

"I want to have a talk with Don Pesco," Ace drawled. "May I come up?"

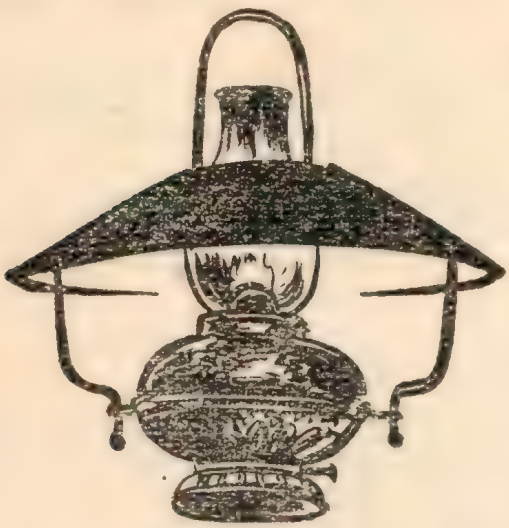
"*Si*, senor. But keep your hands away from your holsters, senor."

"Always willing to oblige," Ace drawled. Grinning, he continued the steep climb, the stallion still at his heels.

"This is a nice way to greet a friend," Ace said in mock anger as the rifle in the other's hand dug into his chest. "I'm disappointed, Don Pesco."

"Senor Champion!" the Mexican ejaculated. He was a round-faced man, with a short, black moustache above a wide, smiling mouth. He was short and plump and his eyes, as they stared at Ace, were jet black. "Why you no say you're Senor Champion? My fran'! My fran'!" A pair of hairy arms caught Ace in a bear-like hug. "I theenk my fran' come back to join our happy land. *Si*, senor?"

"No," Ace replied. "Let me go, you grinning ape. Reserve your embraces for the fair senoritas." With a laugh, Ace pushed the other from him. "Why is the great Don Pesco standing guard? So your men have finally decided to make you do a little work, you grinning lug?"



Don Pesco, whom a score of lawmen would give their right arms to capture, revealed his white teeth in a flashing grin. He spread his arms wide in a gesture of mock anger. "My men, senor, are like overfed peegs. They eat, grunt and snore. And in between snores they growl about the hard work they do doing nothing. *Si*, senor, they are too over-fed, and I have not thee heart to waken 'em. So, senor, I stand guard; I be thee fool. Soon senor, the great Pesco will have to find sometheeng for his brave men to do. Perhaps rustle a few thee cattle or rob thee bank, maybe? *Si*, senor?"

"Don't you think you've done enough already?" Ace drawled, his eyes looking steadily into Pesco's.

"My fran', Senor Champion, talks thee double-Dutch," the outlaw said, as he lifted one hand and fingered a large, black sombrero which hung by a chin-strap at the back of his neck. "The senor will explain, *si?*"

"Sure," Ace drawled. "Apart from rustling cattle and making war on women, the great Pesco slugs me and buries me alive for the damn buzzards to feast on."

The bandit's eyes narrowed and his hands dropped to the butts of his .45's. "Senor Champion no can talk like that even though he did save Pesco's life. *Si*, Senor will explain?"

Ace laughed softly. "I knew that would get under your skin, Pesco. Keep your shirt on, you fat lug." Quickly, Ace told Don Pesco all that had happened during the past few days. "Someone is using your name, Pesco, and he's sure coloring it with blood," Ace concluded.

Pesco brushed past Ace and, walking to the edge of the mountain, gazed downward into the moonlight. He muttered in a cold, deadly voice as he fingered his .45's. "So, Pesco rustles thee cattle and makes thee war on thee weemeen? But Pesco no do thees theengs. Pesco is the small rancher's fran'; he steals only from thee beeg man." As the outlaw turned, his eyes were slits in his dark face. "Whoever do this theeng makes one very beeg mistake. Don Pesco will ride with Senor Champion tonight. *Si*, senor, tonight the bad Don Pesco will cross west of the Pesco Mountains."

"Pedro!" Pesco said suddenly, sharply. "He was a killer. Pesco found that out and made 'im a prisoner, but Pedro he got away before Pesco had made up hees mind what ter do with thee skunk. Pesco's glad he's dead."

As the two men fell into step and headed across the flat top mountain, Ace looked about. The sight was not unfamiliar to him. The top of the mountain across which he now walked was almost as flat as the floor of a house, and, except for the space where the twenty shacks stood, was covered with knee-high green grasses. Ace knew this hideout of Pesco's very well. It was well over three hundred acres in area, and down its centre flowed a stream of cool, clear water. There wasn't a rock any larger than a sombrero on the whole area and the only trees and bush were the few cottonwoods which grew around the shacks. It was an ideal hideout for the much-wanted Pesco. There was no chance of a surprise attack from the law; the only approach to the top being the steep climb which Ace had made earlier. The other three sides of the almost square mountain dropped abruptly for three hundred feet before levelling out in a long, steep climb which would tax even the sureness of the mountain goat.

"I'll have one of my lazy dogs tend your stallion, Senor Champion." Pesco said. "Your hut, senor, she is still empty. We'll ride within two hours; I'll call you, Senor Champion. You'll eat then, *si*, senor?"

As Ace walked into one of the shacks and threw himself down on the hard bunk, he was remembering the time just over three months back when he had first met the smiling, gay Pesco. There had come the sound of gunfire and then into sight had come three men on horses chasing a long rider. Ace had intervened, but by that time the lone rider had been blasted from his horse and was bleeding badly from three bullet wounds. The lone rider had been Don Pesco, the most wanted outlaw in the whole of Texas. For three weeks it had been touch and go as to whether Pesco would live or die, but finally he had recovered sufficiently for Ace to move him to the hideout twelve miles further to the west; a hideout which would have been a very difficult one to find if it hadn't been for Pesco's muttered directions. Having no special destination in mind, Ace had accepted Pesco's pressed invitation to rest a while at the hideout. During that time Ace had come to like and respect the gay, smiling bandit who boasted that he was the rich man's enemy, the poor man's friend. It had been with some misgivings that Ace had finally continued his wandering to march straight into another gunfight between three men and a plucky, golden-headed, lively girl.

It had been a strange friendship which had sprung up between Don Pesco, an outlaw with 20,000 dollars reward on his head; and Ace Champion, wandering cowboy and professional town-tamer.

"He never did tell me why those men were chasing him," Ace muttered. "Most likely they were reward-hunters or even honest-to-goodness lawmen." He grinned. "That's hot. Ace Champion, town-tamer, enforcer of law and order, helps an outlaw—"

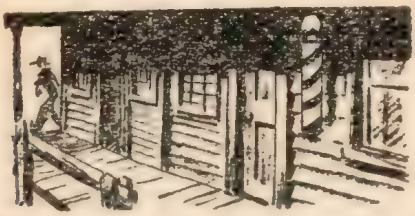
7

THE SUN was just rising above the peaks of the mountains when Ace drew rein and raised his arm in a warning gesture to the twenty men at his back. Turning his head, he spoke to Don Pesco who sat the white mare at his side. "Down there," Ace said, his drawl deadly calm, "are at least twelve men, and everyone of them is a killer. So far the only way down that I know of is that narrow, steep track which has been cut out of the mountain. If those killers should spot us as we go down in single file, they will pick us off

as easy as you like. I'm going down. I ask no man to follow."

"Don Pesco has a score to settle with those killers," Pesco said. "But wait, Senor Champion. I know these mountains a little; follow me, senores."

Silently, the grim men—outlaws all but one—followed Don Pesco as he rode along the rim of the basin. As Ace followed the silent leader, he felt a strange lump rise in his throat. Wanted by a score of sheriffs, wrongly blamed for every crime which had been committed in Texas, these outlaws were riding beside a town-tamer into a fight which was really none of their concern.



They were on the opposite side of the basin and about two hundred yards from its rim when Pesco halted and pointed at a cave in the side of the slanting, rock wall. "There," he said, "is the other entrance to the basin. I knew I no make thee beeg mistake. Perhaps it is better we leave our horses and take our Winchesters; ready, senors?"

●

As Ace stumbled along in the darkness of the slanting cave, he was beginning to think that there was no end. But suddenly daylight appeared below him. Reaching the mouth of the cave, he looked out. They were directly behind a large horse corral in which at least twelve horses roamed restlessly about. A little to the left, but in the middle of the basin and scattered about between the large rocks which littered the floor of the basin, were the small shacks which he had seen the day previous.

Ace took the lead. Without a word, he made a running dive for a large rock about ten yards from the mouth of the cave. Reaching it in safety, he turned and watched the other men as they followed his lead and settled themselves behind separate rocks. As the last man reached his destination, the shacks in the centre of the basin were surrounded by grim eyed, determined men.

And then Don Pesco gave the signal; it was only the flash of sunlight on a rifle barrel, but it was sufficient. The rifles in the hands of Pesco and his dreaded men spat lead and flame at the shacks.

The reply from the shacks were swift and savage. Rifles barked and bullets sent pieces of rock screaming through the air. Ace held his fire as he searched for a live target. Presently, a figure of a man, bent almost double, broke from one of the shacks and raced madly back along the row of shacks toward Ace. Holding his fire until the man was almost to the door of the second shack, Ace raised his rifle and sent the other to the ground in a death-huddle. The man had hardly hit the ground when a second, scurrying like a frightened coyote, attempted the same stunt. He, like his mate, crashed to the ground as Ace's finger squeezed the trigger of his Winchester.

"Now, what's so important about that hut?" Ace murmured as he reloaded the rifle. "Those skunks seem real anxious to reach it. I wonder if any more will try it?"

Three more *did* try, and two of them succeeded. Ace saw them break from the same shack as their comrade had done. One fell beneath a blast of driving lead as Pesco and his men opened fire. But the other two, covering the short distance between the two shacks, reached their destination. Ace had raised his own rifle as the three broke from cover, but it seemed that all the riflemen in the shacks were concentrating on him. A fusillade of shots had slashed out at him, forcing him to sink low as the

hot lead smashed against the rock behind which he stood.

And then, a few minutes after the two men had reached their destination, Ace's question was answered. There came a deafening explosion and the whole basin seemed to leap and rock with the sound. About thirty yards from where Ace stood, one of Pesco's men was lifted high into the air amidst dust and pieces of flying rock. With a sickening crash, the outlaw hit the ground, bounced once, to lie, a twisted and bleeding figure in full view of all.

"Dynamite!" Ace muttered. "Those rocks are loaded with the damn stuff. And it's set off from that shack. No wonder those skunks were so anxious to reach that shack."

Even as Ace spoke, another loud explosion rocked the basin. With a feeling of nausea, Ace turned his eyes away from the sickening sight as another figure was hurled into the air with the dust and pieces of rock.

ACE FELT his spine tingle. At any moment, the very rock behind which he stood might suddenly erupt like a volcano. "Got to stop those skunks," he muttered through tight lips. Dropping his rifle, he loosened his .45 in its holster and made a running dive for an adjacent rock.

He had about three yards to go when a red-hot iron pierced his left thigh, sending him staggering. Grinding his teeth against the sudden rush of pain, Ace forced his lanky figure into a roll and drew himself to safety behind the rock. He pressed his hand to his thigh and when he drew the hand away it was a wet, sticky red. Catching the material of his now red jeans in his hands, Ace examined the wound as he tore the material. A grin split his lips, revealing his clenched teeth as he stared at the shallow gash in the flesh.

Pesco and his men knew what Ace was trying to accomplish. Their rifles spat a stream of lead at the shacks, covering Ace as he made another rush forward. With searching lead snarling about him, Ace reached the door of the shack and kicked it open.

In that split second as the door opened before his savage kick, Ace saw the two men before him—Scarface and the man Ace knew as Clem. Scarface was bending over something on the floor and Clem was whirling away from him, his six-shooter rising to greet the grim-eyed Champion in the doorway.

The gun in Ace's hand exploded then, and Clem, wide-eyed, faded beneath the impact. Scarface's curse sounded as he straightened, his hand going holsterward and coming up gun-filled. Ace felt the slug whip through the sleeve of his shirt as he swung his own weapon slightly. The slug caught Scarface in the belly and threw him backward. Scarface was down, but not out. With tobacco-stained teeth parted in a snarl of pain and his face twisted in a mask of hate, he snapped the .45 upward in line with Ace's forehead.

Calmly, without a movement of a face muscle, Ace planted a slug squarely between the narrow eyes.

During the swift and sudden gunfight in the room, Ace's interest hadn't passed beyond the two men under his gun-sight. Now, as he gazed about the room, he noticed the third man. He was sprawled in one corner of the room and he was bound and gagged.

He was Castiron Morgan—Judy's father.

"Wal, about time yer come, young feller," Castiron stuttered as the gag was removed. "Where the devil have yer been? Where did yer get all the reinforcements? I didn't think yer would make it, son. Yer just reached this shack in time. All those rocks out there are loaded with dynamite which is set off by that gadget over there." Lifting one arm, Castiron pointed at a plunger which stood near the opposite wall. "And see all those wires, son? They lead ter those rocks outside. As each rock was blew ter hell, those skunks used ter connect

another set of wires to that gadget and start all over again."

"I know," Ace said grimly as he stared at the wires which had been threaded through holes in the wall of the shack. "And those wires must go underground outside the shack. If those coyotes had had another plunger, they could have blown us all to hell in a few minutes. I..." His voice faded out beneath the roar of gunfire.

And then came Castiron's yell, "Behind yer, son!"

Ace's .45 was coming up as he turned. A bullet buzzed past his left ear as his own six-shooter spat leaden death in the direction of the two men who stood framed in the doorway. One of the men, a startled expression on his face, sank to the floor without a word as Ace's slug found his black heart.

The other outlaw fired point-blank, but his finger and aim were jerky with fear. The slug smashed into Ace's left arm, throwing him backward to the floor. With his face twisting in a savage snarl, the outlaw snapped up his .45 for the killing shot.

Ace shot from the floor. It was a desperate, awkward shot, but it smashed into the killer's weapon, tore it from his hand and drove it across the floor. The expression of fear was still on the killer's face when another slug tore away the muscles of his right arm, driving him with stumbling steps through the door where he stood framed for a moment before he turned and rushed madly from sight.

"Damn!" Ace muttered. "I wanted to make that hombre talk."

"He didn't get away, senor." Don Pesco stepped into the room, one hand shoving a cursing renegade before him, his other holding a bowie knife which was pressing, point first into the man's side. "You want heem, senor?"

Ace stepped forward and faced the renegade. "You want those wounds dressed?" And as the man stopped cursing long enough to nod, Ace snapped, "All right. What's the name of your big boss? Who is he?"

"Yer may as well go ahead and keel me, senor; if I talk, the beeg boss weel keel me."

"Meaning that you may as well die now than at his hands?" Ace turned to Don Pesco. "See what I mean? These hombres are more afraid of their boss than they are of anything we could do to them."

Don Pesco grinned and shoved the renegade up against the wall. "Many men are not afraid of death, senor. Not when they theenk it weel be queeck—as you would do it. But take me, senor. Death at my hands weel be different. Just like thee way thees coyotes' beeg boss would keel a man, eh?" Don Pesco winked at Ace and held the point of the knife to the renegade's throat.

"Your right arm, skunk, she is no good. Thee slugs have smashed it. Pesco weel cut it off later. But thee ears, senor. You like 'em eh? Pesco theenk he weel make a start on 'em. Pesco saw a man once without ears. It was funny, senor; it made Pesco laugh. Pesco likes to laugh, and Pesco hasn't laughed for a long time."

THE RENEGADE at Pesco's knife-point didn't say anything, just stared straight ahead, his lips tightly closed. But they didn't remain closed for long. They opened wide to free the loud cry which rose behind them

as Pesco lifted his knife with a swift twist of his wrist and cut through the skin of the Mexican's right ear.

"Senor Champion," Don Pesco said, gripping the man's right ear and lifting the knife again, "you won't like what Pesco is going to do. Perhaps it weel be best if Senor Champion went outside, eh? Pesco do not want to be interrupted when he is having hees fun."

Ace turned and walked towards the door as Pesco closed one eye in a wink. But he halted and turned back when the cursing renegade yelled: "Don't go, senor. Don't leave me at the hands of this devil. Senor Ranklin is thee beeg boss, senor. He wants thee land of the ranchers because it has oil. But he weel keel me when he hears that Lucus has told you."

"Carl Ranklin won't have time to worry about you," Ace said grimly. "So that's why Ranklin has been paying well for the cowmen's land. He hasn't been really paying a fair price at all; but he had everyone thinking he was being generous."

"*Si,* senor. We got thee cattle for working for heem and he got the land and thee oil. But he had ter wait until all the cowmen had sold out ter heem first."

"And is there oil on the H-in-a-circle?"

"*Si,* senor. But Ranklin is in love weeth thee senorita; he wants the senorita with thee ranch and thee cattle. He wouldn't let us take many of thee cattle—only enough to pay us. He had ter keell you, senor, because Pedro told heem that you knew Don Pesco."

"And Castiron was to be held here until Judy signed everything over to that skunk?" Ace's voice was harsh again.

"Thee senorita's father owns thee ranch, senor. The senorita weel have ter marry Ranklin to get thee ransom money. Please, senor, that's all Lucus knows. You let Lucus go now?"

"And don't ever come back, Lucus."

"It is all over, senor," Pesco said, stepping back. "Many are dead, and those still alive are showing their yeller streaks as they escape up thee path. My men let them go, senor; they no shoot coyotes in thee back. Pesco weel take hees men back to thee mountain home."

"It's a long way from being over, yet, Pesco," Ace said grimly. "There's still the skunk who's masquerading as Don Pesco; these are just his hired killers. I'm heading for Ranklin's ranch."

"Then Pesco and some of hees men weel ride with Senor Champion," Pesco said. "And Don Pesco weel kill Don Pesco when they meet."

"Pesco and Pesco? What in tarnation is this gent jabbering about, feller?" Castiron yelled as he gazed at the grinning bandit.

But Ace wasn't there to reply. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he had rushed out to his mount and was riding madly toward the H-in-a-circle ranch.

●

Two hours later, with the sun still two hours from setting, he was at the ranch-house, calling Judy's name.

A feeling of dread rushed over Ace as he received no reply. Swiftly, he searched the large house for the slim,

plucky girl who had more than a small share of his hardened heart trapped in her two small hands. "Judy," he called loudly as he went from room to room and then turned with a sinking heart toward the living-room door.

He was just passing the small table in the centre of the room when something small and white on the smooth, brown surface caught his eye. It was a small sheet of writing paper on which were written the following words in a neat, pretty hand.

> Dear Daddy,
> If by some miracle you should be freed before I return, you will know that I am over at Carl Ranklin's ranch.
> You will not agree with what I am doing, but there's no other way. I could not raise the ransom money because Carl owns the bank. Carl has promised to give me the money after we are married. I'm marrying him this afternoon.
> Don't feel sorry for me, daddy. Remember that your freedom means more to me than anything in the world. I did have a hope that Ace Champion could have done something, but he is just like all the others.

There the note ended, and Judy's name was blotched by tear stains.

"Mister Ranklin is going to decide that being born was a bad mistake," Ace muttered as he sprung into the saddle again and turned the stallion in the direction of Ranklin's ranch.

8

FIVE MILES of prairie is not such a long distance for a range-bred horse to cover. It was almost nothing for the powerful legs of the stallion even though it had just completed an arduous run.

Ace didn't even throw a glance at the bunkhouses as he flashed past them to the large, rambling ranch-house. But as he dismounted before the steps leading into the house, he threw a swift, cautious glance about. There was no sign of movement about the bunkhouses, and even the large horse-corral was deserted. He wondered idly where the rest of Ranklin's killers were?

Then Ace forgot everything except Ranklin's smooth voice which floated out through the closed door. "That damn preacher should have been here over two hours ago. What's keeping him?"

Judy's voice, soft and pleading, tore at Ace's heart. "Carl, please send the ransom money now; I'll carry out my part of the—the agreement."

A cold rage rushed over Ace as Ranklin's reply came in a savage whisper. "The money will go after we're married, and not a moment before that. Ter hell with yer old man. It wouldn't worry me if he never returns. I..." His voice broke off as Ace stepped boldly on to the verandah. Lifting his voice in a savage snarl, Ranklin said. "Come in. Where the Devil have yer been? You're coming to a wedding, not a funeral."

"I've come to ready a murdering skunk for a funeral," Ace drawled as he opened the door and stepped into the room, his hand hanging limply near the butt of his .45.

"You!" Ranklin gasped, and Judy's soft voice was filled with a pleasing welcome as she stepped forward, and then halted and moved swiftly to one side as she noticed Ace's grim expression which showed out through the trail-dust. For a few moments, her pleased eyes travelled over his lanky figure, then filled with horror and dismay as she saw the bloody shirt sleeve and the wound in his bare thigh. "Ace, you're wounded," she cried.

"I can still use my gun-hand, Judy," Ace drawled, his bleak stare never leaving Ranklin's eyes. "I've thieving skunk."

"The game's up, Ranklin," he said come to rid the range of a murdering, in a slow, deadly voice.

The fear was still in Ranklin's eyes, but he had recovered his sudden surprise. "I don't know what you're talking about, Champion."

"You should have made sure that your hired killers finished me off instead of burying me alive for the buzzards to feast on," Ace taunted. "That's the trouble of hiring killers who don't carry out your orders."

"You're mad," Ranklin whispered. "You're talking in riddles, Champion; if you were rough-handled, then Pesco is the man you want. Why would I want to try and get rid of you?"

"Because you were afraid that I was going to ruin your little game. Because, like the other hands you had to kill, I couldn't be frightened off, so therefore I had to be done away with. You wanted to hog the whole range, Ranklin. And you almost got away with it. Almost, but not quite. It was a neat, little scheme, Ranklin; you hired a gang of killers to do your dirty work. They got the cattle and you got the land which the poor, beaten ranchers sold dirt cheap to you. But you were very careful not to let your killers rustle too many of the H-in-a-circle herd. You wanted them yourself.

"You intended to force Judy to marry you and you wanted those H-in-a-circle cattle left on the ranch. It was a cunning scheme, Ranklin, but it didn't work just as you wanted it to. I came along and started to think, so you had to get rid of me before I put a stop to your little game."

"You're mad," Ranklin sneered though he failed to hide the fear which was revealed in his darting eyes. "I only bought the land which the ranchers begged me to buy; everyone knows that Don Pesco is behind all the rustling and killing."

"A false Pesco which you created for your convenience, Ranklin. You knew that the real Pesco doesn't cross west of the Pesco mountains, so you had little fear that he would catch up with you. Ranklin, you're that false Don Pesco."

Ranklin's left arm was in a sling. He tenderly passed his other hand over that crippled arm as he sneered. "And I suppose that was myself I chased away from the H-in-a-circle that night when you and Judy were fighting for your lives."

"Just another part of your scheme, Ranklin; they were some of your hired killers. They were sent to throw a scare into Judy and her father, but they weren't to shoot into the house for fear of wounding Judy. Then, you, acting the hero, came along and chased the big, bad men away. Even that brave deed didn't win her over, so her father was carried off and she had to come to you for the ransom money—which you were going to give to her only if she married you."

"You're as mad as that damn loco stallion of yours, Champion."

Ace's voice didn't reveal his anger. "You shouldn't have tried to ride him, Ranklin; you intended to keep him for yourself with the explanation that you found him loose on the range. He broke your arm, Ranklin, and then you tried to break him. But you didn't know that he was a one-man horse. That's another thing you're going to answer for."

"You're still bluffing, Champion."

"You're wasting your time, Ranklin," Ace snapped. "The game's up. Castiron is free and what's left of your killers in the Pesco Mountains are running like scared coyotes. You might have got away with your dirty scheme if I hadn't known the real Don Pesco."

Ranklin's anger finally overwhelmed him and his voice lost its smoothness as he said, "What yer say is true, Champion, but yer're not going ter tell anyone what yer know. I have only ter raise my voice and half a dozen men will come pouring out

of the bunkhouses. Yer the one who had better start thinking, cowboy."

Ace lifted his wounded arm and pointed out through the doorway. "You're mistaken, Ranklin. Hear those hooves? That's the real Pesco coming with his gang to finish cleaning out the murdering skunks who have been blackening his name."

IT WAS THEN that Carl Ranklin made his play. His right hand went holsterward in a flash of blinding speed. In the wink of an eyelash, the hand came up gunfilled and spitting searching lead.

Even as Ace went for his own .45, he had to admire Ranklin's flashing, smooth draw. In that instant before his own iron cleared leather, Ace realised that he was a split-second slower than the man before him. But the lead from Ranklin's .45 was released by a finger which was jerky with fear and anger; the slug caught Ace in the left shoulder and staggered him backward, sending his own slug wide of its mark. Another slug buried itself in the wall opposite Ace's heart, then the .45 in his hand spat its second message of death. Ace squeezed the trigger smoothly, calmly, and the slug entered Ranklin's body just above the huge buckle of his gunbelt. With a hoarse cry Ranklin crashed back against the wall and sank slowly to the floor.

Ace stood swaying on his feet, his eyes watching Ranklin as he sank floorward with curses issuing from his bloody lips. Halfway to the floor, Ranklin recovered sufficiently to lift his six-shooter in slow, jerky movements. His fearfilled eyes sought Ace's. "Ter...ter hell...with...you Champion," he muttered in a weak, fading voice. "Yer haven't won...the ...the last hand...yet." With a superhuman effort, he swung the revolver, not at Ace, but in line with Judy whose slim figure was pressed against the opposite wall.

With cold rage and fear raging through him, Ace lifted his .45 in a desperate movement. Through a mist of pain he snapped the muzzle of the .45 in line with the small space between Ranklin's eyes and pulled the trigger. Through the whirling mist, he saw Ranklin's head jerk and saw the round hole which appeared as if by magic between the cruel, dark eyes.

Ace kept squeezing the trigger until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber, then as the whirling mist of pain turned to darkness, he sank to the floor.

●

When Ace opened his eyes there was water dripping on to his face; Judy was nursing his head, calling him "darling", and pleading with him to live.

And she was kissing him.

From the distance came the faint sound of gunfire and pounding hooves, but Ace didn't waste time on such sounds. He was listening to Judy's voice and he was doing some talking himself.

"I'd be a mean sport to die now," he grinned. "That preacher mustn't be disappointed when he arrives. And I am thinking that this sure is a heavenly place for a wandering tow-tamer to find permanent roots. Yes, a plumb heavenly place."

★

Scattergun For A Killer

True Fact Story by Dave Wilson

CURLY BILL BROCIOUS, rustler and killer, stood at a bar in Galeyville, Arizona Territory. Curly Bill was feeling good, and why shouldn't he feel happy? Hadn't he just sold a herd of stolen horses across the Border in Old Mexico? And, on the way back, hadn't he rustled a herd of cattle, and hadn't he sold the stolen Mexican stock for a nice price to a cowman up in Greenlee county, to the north?

Brocius Bill raised his glass. "Everybody to the bar," he hollered. "This is on Curly Bill, the outlaw."

Galeyville, in this year of 1881, was a rustler's hangout—those too tough for Tombstone hung out in the cowtown. Suddenly a hard hand descended on Curly Bill's shoulder. Quick as a flash, the outlaw's long .45 was out, sticking in the belly of the man with the hand.

"Hold fire, Curly Bill!"

"Pony Deal, dang your buttons—You know better than to come behin' me like that; I almost sent lead through your brisket. What's on your mind, Pony?"

"The sheriff," said Pony Deal, "has a new deputy. His name is Billy Breakenridge, and he is here in town."

"Yeah, well—"

"This deputy is lookin' for you, Curly."

Curly Bill's dark eyes met the blue eyes of his fellow longrider. He and Pony Deal had stolen lots of cattle together. The outlaw pouched his .45 and ran his hand through his thick black hair as he shifted his short, stocky body. "He looks for me, an' I'll deal him a dose of hot lead. Go out and tell this Breakenridge son I'm here in the saloon; I'd cotton to get this over with an' continue with my drinking."

"He's headin' this way now."

"Let him come."

When the new deputy entered, Brocius had his back to the bar, and his right hand hung over his holstered gun as he eyed the new lawman. He saw a young man—a wide-shouldered, big fellow—with a nice grin. He watched the deputy run his glance over the assembly.

"Which one of you," the deputy asked, "is called Curly Bill Brocius?"

"I'm him."

The deputy came forward, hand extended as he introduced himself. Curly Bill, suspicious always, did not shake hands—the deputy might grab his hand and jerk him off balance, thereby breaking the rhythm of his draw. Or the deputy might hang onto his right hand, then draw his own gun with his left, using a cross arm draw.

Smiling, the deputy dropped his hand. "Sorry, Curly Bill," he murmured. "I didn't come with a warrant for your arrest; I want you to pin on a deputy badge and help me collect taxes."

"Collect—taxes!" Brocius, for once,

was taken aback. His eyes popped out and he studied the young deputy as though he had doubts as to the man's sanity. Loco weed was growing, for it was spring. Had the gent grazed on the stuff during his ride over from Tombstone?

"Yeah, taxes! The sheriff sent me over here to make collections. Besides handling the law-assignments, the sheriff also has to collect taxes. And I got figuring you were just sport enough to help me!"

"Sport—me?" Curly Bill laughed. He looked from outlaw to outlaw and his smile grew. He, an outlaw, collecting taxes from honest cattlemen! The idea caught, grew.

"What do you say, Curly?"

"I got some spare time; I'll ride with you, Breakenridge. I kinda cotton to you. Belly up with me, eh?"

"We'll take one drink, get a bottle, and collect taxes."

"One drink, an' then we hit the trail."

ARIZONA history records that Curly Bill Brocius was a good tax-collector. Some citizens who had never paid tribute, suddenly felt stirred to dig deep and pay taxes. Some, in fact, got so conscientious they even paid back taxes.

The deputy and Curly Bill would ride down on a ranch. The deputy would display the present tax bill and other delinquent bills. The rancher, if he demurred, had only to look at Curly Bill, who, by this time, had his hand on his gun. And the rancher paid.

They even dunned wandering cowboys for personal property taxes, and made them big. Brocius' old rustler pals—Pony Deal, the Clantons, Russian Bill and others—also paid taxes; when the drive ended, Breakenridge had over two thousand dollars in his saddlebags.

"The outlaws don't dare rob me with you along," the deputy chuckled. "They're afraid of you, Curly Bill. Well, thanks a heap, and next year we'll collect again, eh?"

"We'll load up with likker and ride out to collect. Good-bye for now, Billy; see you in Tombstone."

"Look out for Wyatt Earp. He's after your hide."

•

Brocius had tangled before with town marshal, Earp. Once, Earp got the upper hand. It happened in a saloon. Earp had passed an edict against cowboys packing guns into town; Curly Bill had not hung up his pistol. He was drinking at the bar when Wyatt Earp's Buntline Special landed over his head. When he awakened, he was in jail.

"Oh, my head— Got a bump on it! What happened?"

Pony Deal, also in the same cell, had a bump on his head; he had no memory, either. He had been walking down the street, remembered hearing boots scuffle behind him; he had turned—then the street lamps had gone out.

A drunk, in the next cell, said, "Earp buffaloed both of you with that Buntline Special revolver."

Curly Bill grinned. He could dish it out. . . and he could take it. The Buntline Special, the Colt packed by Earp, had a twelve inch barrel. Only a few of them had been made, on order of Ned Buntline—the wild-west author who dreamed out tall stories about Buffalo Bill. Only five of the guns had been made, and one had been personally handed to Earp by the dime-novelist.

"He sure can handle that cutter," the outlaw confessed. "Wish he would come and let us out."

When Earp came, he extracted the promise from Curly Bill and Pony Deal that they would not tote their sidearms in Tombstone. Willingly, both promised; within a few moments out

of sight of the jail, they strapped on their weapons.

"Like leavin' an arm home," Curly Bill grumbled, fastening his belt-buckle. "Earp wouldn't ask a man to walk around without a arm, would he?"

"Lawmen ain't got no sense of humor." Pony Deal bit off a chew. "He won't buffalo me again from behind."

"Me, neither."

Earp never again got a chance. When he and Curly Bill tangled, Earp did not buffalo him—there was gunsmoke and death. That though, was some months later, out on the Arizona desert...

CURLY BILL was a gunman, a killer. One of the first men he shot down was another longrider, Dick Lloyd. Lloyd, it seemed, had a bad habit—he insisted on riding his bronc through saloons, all the time shooting and yelling like a drunken Apache. He tried that once in Charleston, an outlaw hangout. Curly Bill was playing cards with a friend, John Ringo.

Lloyd roweled his bronc through the door, the batwings splintering under the impact. He had his .45 out, pelting the ceiling; he yelled and hollered as his spurs worked.

John Ringo looked up from his cupped cards. "Somebody oughta do somethin' about Dick," he grumbled; "he's gettin' to be a damned nuisance."

"I'll handle him," Brocius said. He called to Lloyd, and Lloyd shot at him. Curly shot once; Lloyd left the saddle and his bronc stampeded out the back way.

"Take him to Tombstone and bury him," Curly Bill said. "I'll go the expenses. Give him a headboard in boothill."

"Whose deal is it?" John Ringo asked.

●

Curly Bill continued to rob stages and rustle cattle and horses. For excitement, he matched guns with the marshal of Tombstone—one Fred White—and they toted White away on a board to boothill. Curly Bill did not like the Earps, who were the law in the mining town; he remembered his run-in with Wyatt Earp.

Brocius and his gang of toughs vowed to kill the Earps. They paraded the streets of Tombstone, begging for the trouble that had to come, sooner or later. In between times, he robbed stages and rustled cattle and horses on both sides of the Border. He was a very busy outlaw.

He beat up on Tombstone's mayor; this was another black mark the Law had against his record. Then somebody waylaid Morgan Earp and shot him and killed him; signs pointed toward Brocius.

The Earps were up in arms over the assassination of their brother, who toted a law-star. Morgan had been shooting pool when the bullet had shattered the window. The ball had gone through him and instantly killed a man named George Berry. Morgan's back was broken, and he lived about forty minutes after being shot.

The Earp faction organized a posse, and the outlaws banded together. Momentarily, the evidence that Brocius had asassinated Morgan Earp became stronger; finally, due to information, it became certain. Sign pointed at Mescal Springs, about thirty six miles away; by all tokens Curly Bill and his fellow-killers should be gathered around the oasis.

By the time the posse neared the springs, its members were tired, but Wyatt Earp, anxious to avenge his brother's murder, retained some caution. He doubted if the outlaws would figure they were safe.

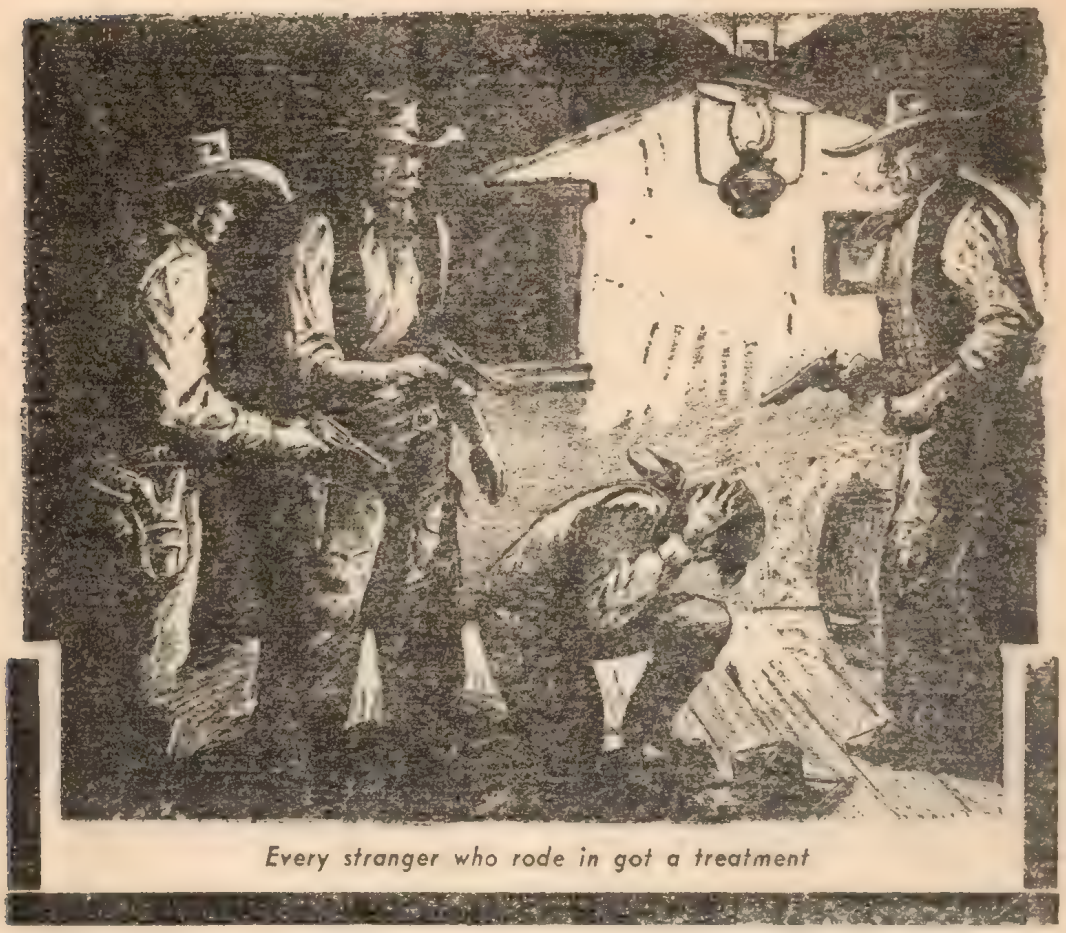
In this premise, he was right. He dismounted his men, and they sneaked through the redsank and manzanita.

Then, without warning, two outlaws were ahead of them. The others dozed around the waterhole. And one of the

(Continued on Page 98)

STRANGER AT THE GATE

By Lon Williams



Every stranger who rode in got a treatment

It was a neat racket while it lasted, but Luke Baily, and his side-kick, didn't know when to let up . . .

LUKE BAILEY, like more charitably-disposed citizens who lived by dusty, far-winding trails, had heard that gentle, neighborly admonition respecting entertainment of strangers. Luke and his fellow deputy-sheriff, Ed Camp, however, were mindful of strangers after their own peculiar fashion. Their idea was not to minister to their needs, but to take them into custody and starve them into a pay-off, a profitable shake-down system which they had applied for several years, drawing no distinction between sinners and possible angels in disguise. Sixty wasteland miles shimmered westward between Luke and Ed's town of Sycamore Flat, and Sheriff Manker's county town of Wyckville. Hence, they maintained their own small pokey, where unfortunates who fell into their hands could securely rot and starve until ready to ask submissively, "What'll it take to get me out of here?" There were no lawyers or mag-

istrates in Sycamore Flat; habeas corpus was unknown, and if Luke and Ed had ever heard of a constitution, they'd remembered it as having to do with a human body, not with rights of human beings. They observed but one distinction among travelers; they victimized none who journeyed westward, lest their system be made known to Sheriff Manker, who might not properly appreciate its cleverness.

So affairs stood in Sycamore Flat when Luke and Ed, shading themselves in front of their hoosegow office, saw a stranger riding into town. They regarded themselves as excellent judges of men, hence could easily spot any timid bozo who was sure to be easy pickings—as well as one who probably would squawk and beller. As between those two classes they discriminated only in method of handling; they spared neither, assuming that for their purposes all strangers were created equal.

Yet they were not sure of this hombre they saw ride up to Pete Nunnelly's artesian-fed watering trough and dismount, loosen saddle girth, and stand by for his horse to drink.

"Who's he?" said Luke.

"Stranger," said Ed.

They stood up, adjusted their gunbelts and loosened their sixshooters.

Luke said, "He's sort of different."

"Sort of growed-up," said Ed.

This stranger, they noted, was a tall gent, and he wasn't acting skittish and awkward, as was usual of strangers. He removed his round black hat and washed his face. That done, he turned his sandy head sideways and let artesian water pour into his mouth. There was nothing hurried or nervous about his movements; when he wiped his face with a bandanna handkerchief, he did so with meticulous care.

Luke spat. "Sort of sissy."

But Ed observed that he was sort of muscular, too, and quick when he wanted to be. He was sun-tanned, well dressed in tight-fitting brown corduroys, tan leather jacket, and brown boots. From saddle-pack he drew a clean blue scarf and knotted it carefully under his chin. Thereafter he combed his thick, longish hair, and dusted his hat before setting it again on his head.

Ed said, "Sort of a dude."

Luke shoved his own headpiece off his scratching place, and scratched. There was one detail in this stranger's get-up that seemed, offhand, to belie any notion that he was either all dude or all sissy. A pair of walnut-butted Colts at his hips put Luke in a quandry as to whether he was merely trying to look fancy or was, perchance, a tough gink who'd drifted in from some distant brush with a posse.

"There's been some stage-robberies out north, around Pruden Junction and Vasper Canyon," Luke recalled.

"Uh-huh," Ed remembered. "A gold shipment of near twenty thousand was took a couple of weeks ago at Staghorn."

Luke further recalled, "There's been cattle rustlin' back on McCully Range, in Sheriff Finletter's county. A slippery, fast-shootin' bunch, accordin' to reports."

"This feller don't look like no rustler," Ed said. "Too fancy and handsome."

Luke nodded. "More likely a bankrobber; there's some at large, especially over in Red River country." Luke shut up suddenly and motioned Ed back inside. Luke followed.

From there they watched. This stranger had not once looked in their direction, unless furtively, and when he'd duded himself up and remounted, he rode leisurely by without looking in at them.

"He's all man," Ed said, when they dared put their heads out again. "About twenty-five years old, I'd say. Hard as flint, too; when we take him, we'll be smart to come up on his blind side. We ought to do him for a hundred dollars, or so—might even be a price on his head."

THEY STEPPED out and gazed toward Kirk Nevil's general store.

"Look," said Luke. "He's going to light and hitch at Nevil's. What could he be wanting there?" He looked at Ed, and crimped his lips in sudden comprehension. "You know something, Ed? There was a familiar look about that dude."

"Yeah," Ed said, "and I know what you're thinking; it was four years ago, come next month. Young Dan Parchment told a slim sissy who worked for Kirk Nevil that this town wasn't big enough for both of 'em. Willie Chavis was his name; he stood right up there, not fifty yards from here, and refused to draw when Dan Parchment challenged him. It was over Hibbie Nevil, Kirk's pretty, brown-eyed daughter."

Once more Luke Bailey consulted his scratching place. He said profoundly, "Ed, it's happened; something that's never happened before, and nobody believed could ever happen. A coward has returned. But just to make sure, Ed—"

"Enough said," Ed cut in; "I'll amble down and get an earful."

Ed ambled down and, ten minutes later, ambled back. "You was right, Luke."

"Willie Chavis?"

"That's what Kirk Nevil called him. I listened from outside. 'Now look here, Chavis,' Kirk was saying 'if you've come back to make trouble over my daughter Hibbie, you better ride on.' This dude says, 'Why should I make trouble over your daughter Hibbie?' And Kirk says, 'You know what I mean. She's married to Dan Parchment now, and doing all right by herself; if you'd had any backbone, you wouldn't have let Dan run you out of town four years ago. Hibbie thought a lot of you until that happened, but that turned her against you.'

"Then this dude says, 'Has Dan Parchment ever run anybody else out of town?' Kirk says, 'No, but he's dangerous; it's my advice to you, Willie Chavis, that you let him alone. You've growed up some since then, changed considerable, and you look like you might know how to take care of yourself; but it's been my observation that a feller who's been a coward once, can never live it down. Anyhow—not in his old home town.' That all I waited to hear, Luke, but they was still going at it, hammer and tongs."

"You heard enough, Ed," said Luke; "our move comes next."

Luke nodded, and they went back inside. "All we got to do is dig up some old dodgers and pick out one that looks something like Willie Chavis. We'll pretend there's a price on his head, and arrest him pronto. In our nice little smokehouse, he'll salt down and keep."

"That is," Ed said, "until he planks down a hundred or so."

"And agrees to leave town again."

"And to stir up no more trouble."

They found an old poster of a lop-jawed gunfighter named Bud Norcross, who'd been a wanted man ten or twelve years before, charged with bank-robbery, but who looked little more like this stranger than a horse looked like a horned tpad. "That's a perfect likeness of Willie Chavis," said Luke. He winked at Ed. "Tell you what we'll do. We'll walk up to Chavis with our mouths pulled down at their corners, and we'll say, 'Put 'em up, Bud Norcross; you're under arrest!' "

Ed gave his mouth a sideways twist. "It'll scare Willie Chavis out of his wits. He ain't got much wits to be scared out of anyhow; otherwise he wouldn't be showing up in Sycamore Flat again."

Luke and Ed threw out their lean chests and marched side by side down to Kirk Nevil's store. They were within ten steps of his porch when they saw their quarry coming toward them.

"He saw us coming," said Luke, "and he's fixin' to hightail; get ready for a draw, and make it a surprise."

Luke and Ed stopped, hands down and sixguns on their way up.

Luke said, "Bud Norcross, put 'em up; you're under—"

Something hit Luke then—hot and jarring and stupefying, bearing in its heaviness and premonition that days of squeeze and shake-down were over, that he and Ed had at last made a terrible miscalculation, one that could never be corrected in this world.

●

THERE HAD been a few witnesses, chief of whom was trim and nervous Kirk Nevil. Sheriff Manker and a posse of twenty men had ridden in, several hours too late, from Wyckville country, trailing an elusive badman who'd made life short and exciting for a foolhardy express-office agent in Maupin, a bragging shotgun-guard on a Pemberton Road stagecoach, a gunslinging deputy marshal at Galena —and possibly two or three other bold and confident gentlemen who'd had their swaggering days concluded by a party, or parties, unknown.

Kirk Nevil had been unnerved by what happened so abruptly and violently in front of his store, but he managed to get out a story. Deputies Luke Bailey and Ed Camp had come down his way to make an arrest.

"Me and this stranger," said Nevil, "was having it back and forth, me thinking he was Willie Chavis, growed up and come bluffing back to see my daughter Hibbie, who'd long since married Dan Parchment, until at last he said to me, 'Well, sir, I'm not Willie Chavis, even if I do look like him, but I'd like to meet this brave son-in-law of yours; I'd like to see how brave he is. I'd like to see if he could run *me* out of town.' That gave me a scare, I'm tellin' you, and when he made known that his sole business in my store was to buy grub and stock up on ammunition for those Colts he was wearin', I sure got busy and waited on him. He never cracked a smile, never lost his temper, never—"

"But about my two deputies?" said big, thick-shouldered Sheriff Manker.

Kirk Nevil glanced about, a most important person amid so many tough looking gunslingers and hard riders. "Ah, those deputies. They was brave men, Sheriff; they walked right straight up to that stranger, and Luke Bailey said, 'Bud Norcross, put 'em up; you're under—' I reckon he aimed to say 'you're under arrest,' but he didn't get it said. Stranger's Colts came up so fast I couldn't see 'em move, and both went off twice apiece. Luke and Ed didn't even draw, though they'd had their guns half-out even before Luke had said a word, and they'd meant to cover him fast and certain."

A posseman spoke up. "Wonder why Luke called him Bud Norcross? Why, Bud Norcross was killed in Laredo near eight years ago."

"Stumps me," said Sheriff Manker. "Stumps me, too, that they even tried to arrest that stranger. He was Clem Horne, fastest and deadliest gunman known in these parts in my lifetime. I'm sort of glad he's drifted on into somebody else's bailiwick. I've got a family."

"Luke and Ed sure were a couple of brave men," several possemen said, one after another.

"None braver," said Manker. "And I'll see they get proper burial too. More'n that, I'll see that something fitting is put on their tombstones; men like them deserve to be remembered."

★

In Our Big November Issue

THE HOME TRAIL

by J. J. Mathews

 (*continued from page 8*)

there were no more than six-thousand Sioux in the entire region of the Yellowstone and The Little Big Horn. This was a formidable force, compared to Custer's brigade of two-hundred and seventy-seven men; but Custer was only supposed to get in behind these desperately-fleeing Indians and await the arrival of Generals Crook, Terry and Gibbons—who, out of General Sheridan's huge force, established solely for exterminating Indians, would have outnumbered the Sioux many times over.

Custer's hurry to arrive on the Little Big Horn could have been prompted by no other desire than personal glory; he drove his brigade almost to the point of exhaustion, and arrived on the Little Big Horn one day before he would have reached that point normally. He took his scout Curley with him and reconnoitred. The two men rode to the crest of a hill and studied the country around about; they saw only one Indian village. This was a peaceable village with many women and children, living safely—or so they thought—under the protection of the recently-ratified peace-treaty signed by Red Cloud. The village looked like a safe target for a glory-hunter and General Custer split his command, part of which under his subordinate Reno was to come up from the rear of the village and cut off the retreat of these peaceful Indians, while Custer's main party would strike from the front.

Custer attacked the village under the stirring music of Garry Owen played by his cavalry musicians, and the Indians were slaughtered indiscriminately—especially when they attempted to flee. They were mostly unarmed, burdened by their women and children, and by Reno's force in their rear.

In this skirmish Curley acquired a spotted-rump horse of the type called, at that time *a'Pelouse*—and known today as Appaloosa—which was one of the much coveted war-horses, cultivated by the Nez Perce Indians. (They were so fine that seven-hundred of them were slaughtered by orders of a Colonel Wright, whose cavalry-units had been severely beaten by Indians mounted on these great horses, outmaneuvering and outfighting the cavalry mounts.)

After this attack, Custer was feinted into attacking the main camp of Ogalala Sioux by Crazy Horse—who recognised that he had to fight or surrender, because Custer was bent on war. Using a clever trap of the spotted-rump Nez Perce horses to entice Custer into attacking where he wanted him to, Crazy Horse struck with the savage fury and ferocious abandon that marked his battles.

CURLEY told of the awful decimation in later years. When Custer's part of the command rode into the trap, baited with the Appaloosa horses, the Sioux struck with everything they had. They circled Custer's force and, screaming like wild demons from hell, rode around and around the cavalrymen pouring rifle-fire and short war-arrows into the mass of men. Custer had courage; many things can truthfully be said against him; he showed little humanity, or thoughtfulness, and virtually no consideration for others, Indian or "white"; he cared only for personal glory and gave no thought to the cost, or who must pay it. But no one, Indian or "white", even in the smoky lodges of his bitter enemies has ever said that he was not brave.

History need not rely solely on Curley's word that Custer stood in the middle of his writhing, dying soldiers and fought with legs apart, long hair streaming, never taking a backward step. The position of the body of General George A. Custer, when found by the relief-column, proved this was how he fought and died.

As the battle raged and the turmoil, noise, dust and screams made the land ring in blood-chilling echoes, Curley—the only Crow scout left alive, and one of the few members of the American force yet unwounded, could see that there was to be no escape. He crawled to the body of a Sioux warrior, dragged the corpse behind a mound of dead horses and "whites", tore off his buckskin garb—ornamented as it was with the beaded symbols of the Crow tribe—and put on the raiment of the dead Sioux. In this disguise, he lay behind his bulwark of sightless bodies and fired carefully at the encircling warriors. The pall of smoke that overhung the battlefield was like a shroud of dirty grey and the cries of the wounded, thick with bubbling blood in their mouths, made a dirge that Curley never forgot.

When the fighting came closer to the scout—as it did, for cavalrymen had died by the score—Curley could see hand-to-hand struggles going on all around him. The Sioux were within the defensive circle, and the Seventh Cavalry, a courageous brigade, misguided under General George A. Custer, had almost ceased to exist except on the company and horse books of the United States Army.

Curley waited until the Sioux were running in general confusion in all directions, firing into the glazing eyes of the dying, and lifting scalps off the dead; then he slid from his hiding-place and mingled with the attackers in the furious, confusion, jostling arms with the bloody and victorious Ogalala until he saw a chance of escape. He caught a snorting horse that was running loose, mounted, and rode hard down the Little Big Horn.

Curley's appropriated horse developed a bad limp, and the Crow turned him loose and continued on his way afoot. He traveled as fast as he could; but, under the circumstances, he had to employ extreme caution because bands of warriors were constantly riding across the land. Finally, he managed to reach the junction of the Little Big Horn with the Big Horn river, where he found a supply boat and told the officer in command what was the first report of the battle which shocked the entire civilized world.

In his old age, Curley talked little of the massacre; the subject was distasteful to him and he was reticent about it. Before he died, in 1923, he said that it was impossible for one man to give an accurate account of any battle—because one man could not possibly see all that was transpiring around him, especially when he was fighting for his life.

But Curley, the husky Crow Indian scout was the sole human survivor of the Battle Of The Little Big Horn, and through his eyes and from his lips only, can we, today, get the story from the American's point of vantage.

●

TRAIL OF NO RETURN

by Lee Thomas

He was an old cowboy—a slender, leathery-faced rider—and his blue eyes watched the calf, which was only a day old. The calf, upon seeing the oldster and his companion, ran like a deer for its mother, who grazed along the banks of Texas' Red River. Then the calf skidded to a stop; now he stood watching them—for they were the first humans he had ever seen.

"Thet little fella ain't been in the Lone Star State long," the old cowboy said with a smile. "He's ascared of a man on hossback even though no man has ever laid a rope on him; he'll make a nice chunk of beef when he comes four year old, Jim."

"An' when he gets four years behin' him," Jim said, "he'll have cause to be afeered of a man. Well, night's comin' down fast, ol' timer, an' we'd best push on for the Timber Ridge line-camp afore it rains."

[*Turn To Page* 92]

AMAZING! AT TREMENDOUS SAVINGS!

NEWEST Hit Parade Break-Resistant Vinylite Filled RECORDS

CHOOSE . . .

18

- ☐ HIT PARADE TUNES
- or
- ☐ MOST LOVED HYMNS
- or
- ☐ HILL BILLY HITS

Brand New Discovery—6-IN-1 Vinylite *BREAK-Resistant* Records—Play Up To 10 Full Minutes

IMPORTANT NOTICE!
These tunes are CONSTANTLY kept up to date—only the newest tunes are kept on the list.

ORDER BY MAIL AT 500% SAVINGS!

REGULAR 10" RECORDS Used On All Standard 78 R.P.M. Phonographs and Record Players.

YOUR FAVORITE GROUP OF SONGS!

ONLY $2.98

$16.02 VALUE 18 TUNES!

YOU GET

A $16.02 Value For $2.98 You SAVE $13.04

18 HIT PARADE TUNES

Domino
Undecided
Cold, Cold Heart
Because Of You
It's No Sin
Down Yonder
I Get Ideas
Slow Poke
Tell Me Why?
Just One More Chance

Cry
Turn Back The Hands of Time
The Little White Cloud That Cried
Charmaine
Anytime
Jealousy
Birthday Song
Be My Life's Companion

18 HILL BILLY HITS

If I'd Be Sorrel
May The Good Lord Bless and Keep You
Mr. Moon
Give Me More, More, More
Music Makin' Mamma from Memphis
Baby, We're Really In Love
I Wanna Play House With You
Hey, Good Lookin'
Alabama Jubilee

Let's Live a Little
Always Late
Cryin' Heart Blues
Cold, Cold Heart
Somebody's Been Beatin' My Time
Slow Poke
Let Old Mother Nature Have Her Way
Crazy Heart
Mom And Dad's Waltz

18 MOST LOVED HYMNS

The Lord's Prayer
Onward, Christian Soldiers
What a Friend We Have In Jesus
Church In The Wildwood
In The Garden
Faith Of Our Fathers
There Is Power In The Blood
Leaning On The Everlasting Arm
Since Jesus Came Into My Heart

Trust On Till
Jesus Keep Me Near The Cross
Softly And Tenderly
Dear Lord And Father Of Mankind
A Mighty Fortress
Sun Of My Soul
Just A Closer Walk With Thee
It Is No Secret What God Can Do
May The Good Lord Bless And Keep You

IMPORTANT NOTICE!
These tunes are CONSTANTLY kept up to date—only the newest tunes are kept on the list.

Now, for the FIRST TIME—You can have the BRAND NEW ALL-TIME HITS and POPULAR RECORDINGS—18 NEWEST All-Time Hits, favorites in all—for the AMAZING, unbelievable LOW PRICE of only $2.98. That's right, 18 TOP SELECTIONS that if bought separately would cost up to $16.02 in stores, on separate records—YOURS by mail for only $2.98! YES, you can now get 18 HIT PARADE songs—the LATEST, the NEWEST nation-wide POPULAR TUNES—or 18 of the most POPULAR HILL BILLY tunes—some of these tunes are not yet sold by stores—or you get almost a whole complete album of your most wanted HYMNS. These are tunes you have always wanted. They will give you hours of pleasure. You can choose from THREE DIFFERENT GROUPS—on newest, most sensational BREAK-RESISTANT records! These amazing records are 6-IN-1 records—6 songs to a record! They are brand new and play three times as many songs as regular records, and they play on regular 78 R.P.M. speed and fit all Type 78 R.P.M. standard phonograph and record players. These are all perfect, BREAK-RESISTANT, Vinylite records free from defects. RUSH YOUR ORDER for your favorite group **NOW!** ORDER ALL THREE GROUPS and SAVE even MORE MONEY, only $2.98 per group.

SUPPLY LIMITED. That's why we urge you to fill in and mail coupon now! Play these 18 selections ordered, use the NEW GIFT surface saving needle, for 10 days at home. If you are not delighted, if you don't feel these are the BEST SOUNDING records for the price, return within 10 days for FULL REFUND. Don't delay, send $2.98 in check or money order, or put three one dollar bills in the mail with this coupon and SAVE POSTAGE—DON'T DELAY, MAIL COUPON TODAY!

FREE!

If you RUSH YOUR ORDER NOW you get at NO EXTRA COST whatsoever a *SURFACE SAVING NEEDLE!* ORDER 18 Hit Parade Tunes or 18 Hill Billy Hits or 18 Most Loved Hymns or ORDER ALL THREE SETS FOR only $7.95. But, SUPPLY is LIMITED; so order at once. SEND COUPON TODAY. Order now on Money-Back Guarantee.

MAIL COUPON NOW—10-DAY TRIAL OFFER

HIT TUNES COMPANY, Dept. 24
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

Gentlemen: Please RUSH the 18 Top Selections along with the GIFT SURFACE SAVING NEEDLE on your NO-RISK 10 Day Money Back Guarantee. I enclose $2.98 for each group of 18 selections with the understanding that if I am not completely satisfied you will return my money.

- ☐ 18 Hit Parade Tunes.....$2.98
- ☐ 18 Hymns.....$2.98
- ☐ 18 Hill Billy Hits..$2.98
- ☐ All Three Groups, 54 SONGS.....$7.95

NAME .....
ADDRESS .....
CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....

TOOTHACHE?
For Quick Relief Ask your Druggist for DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS POULTICE

ROCKET TO THE MOON!
Atomic Power and Radar solve the problems of Space flight! Rocket to the MOON now possible!
Join the United States Rocket Society, Inc. A nation-wide, not-for-profit organization of scientists, engineers, technicians and amateurs, all eager to unite to Conquer Space! JOIN NOW. Every nation on earth races to be first to reach the MOON! YOU want to see YOUR countrymen land there first. Send 10c for informative application. United States Rocket Society, Inc., Box 29, Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

DICE — CARDS — GAME SUPPLIES
Perfects, Flats, Weights, Strippers and Readers Made to your specifications
Established 1909 Catalogue upon Request
HILL BROS., Box D, Salida, Colo.

THEY'RE TERRIFIC! PACKED WITH RARE CARTOONS and GOOD CLEAR ILLUSTRATIONS AS YOU LIKE IT. RICH IN FUN and HUMOR. 20 BOOKLETS ALL DIFFERENT, SENT PREPAID FOR $1 IN PLAIN SEALED WRAPPER. NO C.O.D.s.
NATIONAL, Dept. 538, Box 5-STA. E, Toledo 9, Ohio

DICE • CARDS
MAGIC Cards—READ THE Perfect Dice, Magic Dice BACKS—Inks, Daubs, Poker Chips Gaming Layouts, Dice Boxes, Counter Games, Punchboards. WRITE FOR CATALOG TODAY.
K. C. CARD CO., 852 So. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.

STOP TOBACCO

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people.
In Business Since 1909
THE NEWELL COMPANY
266 Clayton Sta. • St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

BOOKLETS
The kind grownups like. Each one of these booklets is POCKET SIZE, also contains 8 ILLUSTRATIONS, and is full of fun and entertainment. 12 of these booklets, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid in SEALED wrapper upon receipt of $1.00, or 24 BOOKLETS, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid for $2.00, cash or money order. No orders sent C. O. D. Print name and address and mail to:
TREASURE NOVELTY CO., DEPT. 27-P
2 Allen Street, New York 3, N. Y.

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS
Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4½ x 2¾ and is FULLY ILLUSTRATED. We will send 24 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 60 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of $2.00. NO CHECKS. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C. O. D.
REPSAC SALES CO.
1 Orchard St., Dept. 150-P New York 2, N. Y.

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

"Makes my heart good to see a young calf," the old cowboy said. He glanced back when they reached the far ridge. The calf was having his supper, he and his mother small against the distance and the darkness. Jim was right; the calf would learn to fear man, and his first lesson in fear would start soon. It would start with spring roundup.

Spring roundup was also called "calf" roundup. The purpose of the "gather" was to brand all calves, castrate the young bulls, and to earmark the calves.

During spring roundup the calf got his first taste of man's brutality. The ranch-owner "ran out a wagon"; cowboys rode circles; and cows with calves were driven into a herd, usually on a flat or creek bottom. Then branding fires were lit and irons were heated.

Cowboys roped in pairs. One "caught" the critter by the head, the other by the hind legs. They seldom missed their loops. A calf would dart out of the herd in fear; a loop would snake out, kiss the dust, and his hind feet would be caught. Another loop snaked out to catch him around the neck.

Bawling, helpless, he was dragged to the branding fire. A cowboy called out the brand his mother carried. "Quarter Circle N Bar N, Mike. Come on, cowboy, slap the iron to this critter; we got work to do."

"Hol' your hosses, Ike."

The branding-iron came down, burning through the shaggy hair. You got the smell of burning hair and flesh; smoke was a ribbon against the blue sky of the Panhandle. Then the calf was earmarked. A handler loosened the ropes holding him and he trotted away, shaking his head as he wondered about his new earmark.

"Look out for that ol' cow, handler!"

The handler had turned his back to

[*Turn To Page 94*]

MARRIAGE MISCHIEF

FULL PAGE CARTOONS

MARRIAGE MISCHIEF is brand new, devilishly indiscreet, with original full page cartoons. Whether you're looking forward to the day, or looking back (with or without regrets), you'll go for this saucy "undress" view of bride and groom. Gay and tricky as wedding champagne, it will keep you gagging through a season of marriages. And talking of gags, here's a Whopper. Give MARRIAGE MISCHIEF as a wedding or anniversary present.

FEATURES

- The Bachelor Dinner
- The Wedding Daze
- The Truth About Trousseaux
- What Every Bride Should Know
- Hazards of the First Night
- From Smoker to Bedroom
- Honeymoons—Conventional and Otherwise
- Counsel for the Bewildered Groom
- And many more

ORDER ON APPROVAL
Order MARRIAGE MISCHIEF in plain wrapper for 10 days' FREE examination. If not thoroughly satisfied, return for immediate refund of complete purchase price.

ONLY 98¢

PLAZA BOOK CO.
109 Broad St., New York 4, N. Y.

MAIL COUPON TODAY

PLAZA BOOK CO. DEPT. A-909
109 Broad St., New York 4, N. Y.

Send MARRIAGE MISCHIEF in plain wrapper. If not satisfied, I may return it in 10 days for refund.

☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman 98c plus postage.
☐ I enclose 98c—send postpaid.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

Canada and Foreign—$1.25 with order

EASY MUFFLER REPAIR

Fix holes yourself in 5 minutes. No tools needed. STOP man-killing carbon monoxide! STOP noise! STOP costly repairs! Kit fixes several mufflers and tail pipes. MONEY BACK GUARANTEE! Rush $2.00 with name and address to:

NoCo PRODUCTS 3387E E. 142 St. Cleveland 20, Ohio

FOR SPARE TIME PROFITS OR A FULL TIME CAREER

LEARN **UPHOLSTERING**

Learn at home in months! Earn spare time money —or start a shop! Easy lessons show how. Tools and materials to build ottoman included. Low terms. *Write for valuable booklet today!*

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE, Dept. U66-8
1400 Greenleaf Avenue • Chicago 26, Illinois

Lovely used DRESSES

10 for 4.95

The biggest bargains we have ever offered. Prints, solids, rayons, cottons, etc. Assorted styles and colors. Sizes 10 to 18. 10 for $4.95. Larger sizes 6 for $4.95. Some of these dresses were worth up to $50.00 when new. Send $1 deposit, balance C.O.D. plus postage. Your $4.95 refunded if dissatisfied, or merchandise exchanged, if desired. Many other clothing bargains for entire family.

POSTCARD BRINGS FREE CATALOG
Buy with confidence at

ALLIED MAIL ORDER CO., INC., Dept. GM
162 CHRISTOPHER AVE., BROOKLYN 12, N. Y.

BOOKS ON HYPNOTISM
Tells you How!

HYPNOTISM SIMPLIFIED.....50c
HYPNOTISM REVEALED.....1.00
HOW TO HYPNOTIZE.....2.00
MASTER COURSE HYPNOTISM.....2.00
LESSONS IN HYPNOTISM-Cook.....2.00
HYPNOTISM - SUGGESTION - Forel.....3.00

Also Others-Send check or money order to
WEHMAN BROS. 712 Broadway, Dept. DD New York 3, N.Y.

ILLUSTRATED BOOKLETS AND NOVELTIES

Our VEST POCKET series of ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS are the kind that are FULLY ILLUSTRATED with comic characters. The NOVELTIES are the kind MEN want for EXCITEMENT and AMUSEMENT. 14 DIFFERENT booklets and 4 DIFFERENT novelties sent in SEALED envelope prepaid upon receipt of $1.00. No C.O.D. orders or checks accepted. WHOLESALE PRICE LIST included with orders only.

LIVE WIRE NOVELTY CO., DEPT. 114-P
3 Orchard Street New York 2, N.Y.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC

Submit one or more of your best poems for free examination. Any subject. Send poem for details and information.

Phonograph Records Made
FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS
660 Beacon Bldg. Boston 8, Mass.

the cow's mother. Now she charged him, long horns wicked, slobber hanging. But the handler, wise to the ways of angry cows, did not run; instead, he dropped to the ground and hugged the earth. The cow could not get her horns low enough to hook him so she jumped over him, kicking as she cleaned his prone body. But the handler was wise to kicks, too; he stayed down until the cow had been hazed back into the herd.

Sometimes cowboys did not rope in pairs. One alone caught the calf by the head; then "flankers" flanked the calves, grabbing them over the back by the flank and a front leg. The calf was then unceremoniously dumped on his side and the flanker tied three of his feet together with a "piggin' string"—a long length of buckskin thong, flexible and easy to handle.

After being branded, the calf and his mother were allowed to drift back onto open range, there to spend the summer unmolested by riders. Occasionally a cowboy would ride through the section where they grazed but he did not harm them; he was just out checking on the grass and the water holes.

SO THE CALF spent a lazy summer. Because the grass was good, and water plentiful, his mother had a lot of milk. Within a month or so his brand "peeled"— in other words, the burned skin peeled, coming off in shreds. Now his brand stood out clearly, and his ear had healed from the earmark-knife.

His color changed a little, too, as he lost his early hair; he became a dun steer, long-legged and long of horns. He developed aggressive habits. Cows, like humns, have leaders; they also pick on the weak. The dun found out he could push the other calves around; this he did and he became their leader.

Summer drifted lazily by as it does on the Texas Panhandle—there were

of course, the sudden thunderstorms rising out of a clear sky; also, there were the hard winds. The nights became nippy; summer changed to fall and cattle started to get longer coats of fur. One day the air held something the calf had never before seen—snow.

By this time his mother had weaned him. She had had him around long enough; she was going "dry". Whenever he tried to suckle her she would kick him. He soon learned to dodge. She would butt him away, for he was no longer her charge; her milk had made him big. She had kept the wolves away from him, and had protected him to an age when his future was his own—and that of the rancher who owned him.

The old cowboy had watched the calf's growth. He noticed the big bones, the huge frame, the long legs, the aggressiveness. "He'll make a good steer, Ike. Lots of bones to hang meat on, them long legs let him cover lots of grass for grazin', an' no wolves is pullin' him down—he'd fight them off with them horns he's a-gettin'."

"John Chisum done moved a trail-herd into Kansas this summer," Ike said. "You've heard about thet, ain't you?"

"I sure have. He moved cattle across the Injun Nations, and got through with his hair, too. Boss says he'll run out a trailherd north come spring. Besides brandin' calves in spring roundup we also cut out steers to haze north."

This was the steer's first winter and therefore his hardest. *Northers* blew across the prairies and brought snow; the weaker cattle died. He became gaunt and his hide was shaggy and he fought off the wolves. At last spring came to bless Texas; grass sprouted miraculously. He lost his shaggy coat; his gaunt ribs filled out with meat, and the sun was good. Spring roundup came again but he was *cut back*—there was no percen-

[*Turn Page*]

SECURES NAVY RATING AS A RESULT OF NIA TRAINING

"I wish to express appreciation to the Newspaper Institute. The course enabled me to attain the rank of Chief Journalist, the highest enlisted rank in the Navy, and also one of the hardest to achieve as there are only 46 in the entire Navy."—John B. Smith, JOC, USN, Headquarters, Naval Air Training Command, U.S. Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Fla.

How Do you KNOW you can't WRITE?

Have you ever tried?

Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery "I am a writer?"

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably never will write. Lawyers must be law clerks. Doctors must be internes. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our time, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that anyone becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on journalism—continuous writing—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

Learn to Write by Writing

Newspaper Institute training is based on the New York Copy Desk Method. It starts and keeps you writing in your own home, on your own time. Week by week you receive actual assignments, just as if you were right at work on a great metropolitan daily. Your writing is individually corrected and constructively criticized. Thoroughly experienced, practical, active writers are responsible for this instruction. Under such sympathetic guidance, you will find that (instead of vainly trying to copy some one else's writing tricks) you are rapidly developing your own distinctive, self-flavored style—undergoing an experience that has a thrill to it, and, which at the same time, develops in you the power to make your feelings articulate.

Many people who should be writing become awe-struck by fabulous stories about millionaire authors and, therebore, give little thought to the $25, $50 and $100 or more, that can often be earned for material that takes little time to write—stories, articles on business, shop crafts, hobbies, sports, current events, veterans' affairs, travel, local and club activities etc.—things that can easily be turned out in leisure hours, and often on the impulse of the moment.

A Chance to Test Yourself Free!

Our unique Writing Aptitude Test tells whether you possess the fundamental qualities necessary to successful writing—acute observation, dramatic instinct, creative imagination, etc. You'll enjoy taking this test. It's FREE. Just mail the coupon today and see what our editors say. Newspaper Institute of America, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925.)

FREE NEWSPAPER INSTITUTE OF AMERICA
One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Free Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

Mr. }
Mrs. } .....

Miss

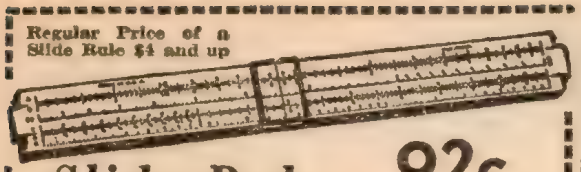
Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

(All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.)
31-P-362

Copyright 1951 Newspaper Institute of America

Regular Price of a Slide Rule $4 and up



Slide Rule **92c** and this coupon
Add 8c Postage

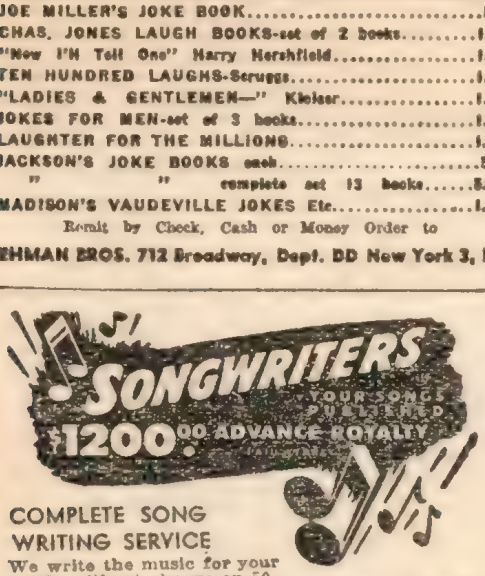
If you know how to use a pencil you can use a slide rule. For bookkeepers, accountants, salesmen (figuring commissions, cost, etc.), farmers, housewives, etc. For Armed Forces highly important. Men's most useful tool. Easy to calculate instantly. Multiplying, proportions, division, extracting roots, etc. "High Vision" Clear View Slide. Full 10" Rule. A, B, C, D, CI and K scales. FREE 28-page instruction book on how to get correct answers instantly without pencil or paper.

Gene Loewy, 545 5th Ave., N. Y. 17
Dept. 153-B Limit three rules to each coupon

JOKE CENTER
Featuring The "Better" Joke Books!

MOE MILLER'S JOKE BOOK.....50c
FOTO FUN POST CARDS-Photo Novelty.....50c
"THE COUNTRY PLUMBER" better than the Specialist..50c
JOE MILLER'S JOKE BOOK.....50c
CHAS. JONES LAUGH BOOKS-set of 2 books.....1.00
"Now I'll Tell One" Harry Hershfield.....1.00
TEN HUNDRED LAUGHS-Scruggs.....1.00
"LADIES & GENTLEMEN—" Kleiser.....1.50
JOKES FOR MEN-set of 3 books.....1.50
LAUGHTER FOR THE MILLIONS.....1.00
JACKSON'S JOKE BOOKS each.....50c
" " complete set 13 books.....5.00
MADISON'S VAUDEVILLE JOKES Etc.....1.00

Remit by Check, Cash or Money Order to
WEHMAN BROS. 712 Broadway, Dept. DD New York 3, N.Y.



COMPLETE SONG WRITING SERVICE

We write the music for your words without charge on 50-50 basis. We send you records, copies and copyright your song for you in Washington, D. C.

GUARANTEED PUBLICATION

We guarantee the publication of at least two songs each month by a legitimate B.M.I. music publisher. The writers receive advance royalty and a standard royalty contract. The publisher pays all publication expenses.

WHAT ARE YOUR CHANCES?

If you have ability your chances are good. New song-writers become famous every year. Maybe this is YOUR year. Publishers are constantly on the lookout for good songs. Turn your material over to a firm whose business is SONGWRITING.

WRITE TODAY

SEND YOUR POEM or lyric today for free examination and complete information on our exceptional offer.

HOLLYWOOD TUNESMITHS
Dept. K-9 1558 No. Vine St., Hollywood 28, Calif.

tage in hazing him into the herd. He was too young for beef, and he had been branded, earmarked, and castrated the year before.

He spent another summer and the old-timer watched him grow. Winter came again; and spring found him two-yeers-old—long of horn, rangy and big. His was a lazy life—a life of long grass and long naps under oak trees. That summer grass grew short due to drouth and he became gaunt again. The Red River became a river of pothholes, and cattle drank there—day by day the water receded and the holes became shallower. Cattle sipped the water and got water and mud. They lifted their heads and bawled, and the silt of the Red River was red on their noses. Well had the river been named. The old timer and other cowboys were continuously in saddle turning weak cattle down toward the river, for cattle wanted to drift in search of more water and longer grass.

Cowboys dug out springs and waterholes. Water seeped in—red and dirty; still, it was water. Teams "slipped" out mud from springs. One cowboy handled the team, another held the slip. They dug out springs nd watched dirty water slowly seep in. They pulled cattle out of bog-holes. Wolves and coyotes were fat and sleek; these scavengers grew fat on the misfortunes of the cattle.

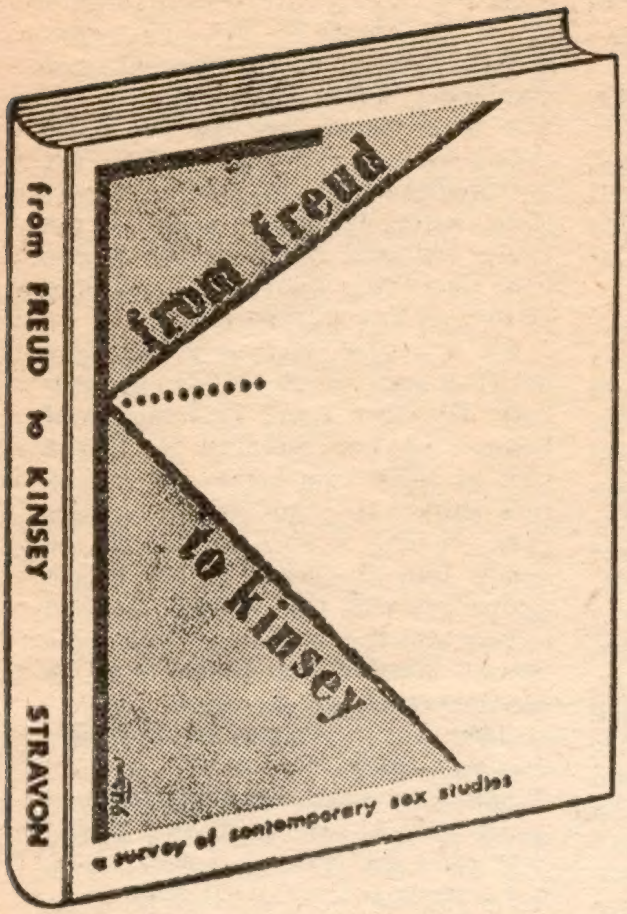
The old timer said, "That dun steer is a smart one. He don't git bogged down, not that boy. I've watched him for two years now. Somehow, he attracted me since the day he calved over on Blackbush Flat; them horns of his can turn any wolf."

"He's poor; his ribs are showin'."

Old-timer studied the sky. "It'll rain in a few days. It has to rain, men;

[*Turn To Page* 98]

Don't Forget!
32 More Pages
In Our Next Issue



WHAT'S ALL THIS TALK ABOUT THE KINSEY REPORT?

FROM FREUD TO KINSEY is offered here for only $1.98. The Kinsey Report is the most extensive investigation into sexual behavior in America. It broke like a bombshell! If the public code of morals were strictly enforced, according to Kinsey, 95% of the active male population would have to be put away. Actual figures are given on sex practices, and sex relations existing on different levels among social groups in a new book explaining the Kinsey Report—FROM FREUD TO KINSEY.

NEW FACTS ABOUT YOURSELF

ONLY $1.98

Things previously not talked about now appear widespread and common. For people who are tortured with shame, startling new information is available. Many divorces may be averted and broken families saved with this new knowledge. This amazing book also presents other vital 20th century sex studies. Works of Freud, Ellis, Stopes, Sanger and others are explained in simple, non-technical language.

ORDER ON APPROVAL

Order FROM FREUD TO KINSEY in plain wrapper for 10 days FREE examination. If not thoroughly satisfied, return for immediate refund of complete purchase price. Don't wait! Act now!

10 DAYS FREE TRIAL
MAIL COUPON NOW

10 DAY FREE TRIAL • MAIL COUPON NOW

M. L. SALES CO. Dept. 9
241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y.

Rush FROM FREUD TO KINSEY in plain wrapper for 10 DAY FREE TRIAL. If not satisfied, I get my purchase price refunded at once.

☐ Send C.O.D. I'll pay postman $1.98 plus postage.

☐ I enclose $1.98. You pay all postage.

Name ..... Age.....

Address .....

City .....Zone....State.....

Canada & Foreign—No C.O.D.—Send $2.50

always has rained and always will rain."

THEN, ONE day, without warning, the clouds sprang up; rain fell in torrents. Cowboys rode the range, wet to the hide, yet happy. Grass would grow and waterholes would turn into a river again... The Red River of the South.

Winter came, but the winter was not severe. Although the big dun steer did not know it, he was heading north toward Dodge City, Kansas, when spring came. Usually cowmen sold only four-year-olds; the dun was only three. But the drouth had hit the Texas cowmen hard and his owner had decided to trail three-year-olds north.

Spring roundup came, and he was hazed into the beef-herd, which consisted of other steers and old cows. Dust rose and the steers milled and pawed, rebellious and hating to leave their home-range. Gradually the herd grew bigger as cowboys hazed wild steers out of the *chaparral*. The herd was moved from one point to the other, and at last the range was "worked."

"We head them north tomorrow," the boss told the old-timer. "You're trailboss, as usual; good luck."

So the trailherd was turned toward the north. Ahead lay the Indian Nations, a land of rolling green hills, of treacherous rivers and bitter redskins. The mess wagon followed the herd, rolling through the hanging dust; the hoss-jingler herded his *remuda* on the right, letting his ponies graze as the cattle lumbered north toward Dodge City where they would be loaded onto cattle cars and shipped east.

By this time, he was a big, ugly brute—a hammer-headed, shaggy longhorn. His huge frame held little beef because of poor breeding. He had a hide as thick as a bottom of a cast-iron skillet. He had mean and ugly eyes. He was a born leader and he swung into the lead, heading north against his will. Occasionally he tried to turn and bolt back, but riders were against him. Within a few days he was too tired to fight them; he just plodded north, following the old-timer who rode point.

Old-timer looked back at him and spoke to him. "Ol' fella, I've known you for some time. Jes' keep them steers pointed north, an' we'll git along all right. We'll hike into Dodge an' this boy'll come back to Texas—but you won't come back."

★

★

Scattergun For A Killer

(Continued from Page 84)

two, who had suddenly materialized out of the brush, was Curly Bill Brocius.

Wyatt Earp toted a scattergun; so did Curly Bill. Curly Bill raised his shotgun and Earp later said he could see the outlaw's eyes close as he hurriedly caught his sight. Earp, however, took his time; he always made a swift count to *three* before he fired on a man.

Curly Bill's beebees brushed the lawman's shirt to one side; then, without blinking, Earp shot with both barrels. Curly Bill Brocius, outlaw, killer, ambusher, was almost shot in two.

And so he died, his blood soaking into the Arizona sand. As a man said later, "He was no good—he should never have been born." Then the man added, "But he had a sense of humor—remember the time he helped Billy Breakenridge collect taxes?"

"That's about all he had," another said; "humor, and a fast gun—that wasn't fast enough against Wyatt Earp."

Picture Appears On Paper For You To Trace!

DRAW instantly

NO EXPERIENCE!
NO TALENT!
NO LESSONS!
NO SKILL NEEDED!

NOW you can easily draw people, animals, or still life, or maps like an artist even if you have never drawn a straight line before.

Now you can easily copy any picture and you can easily enlarge or reduce anything you wish to draw. Students get better school marks with it.

DRAW ANY TYPE OF DRAWING

Human figures, all objects, needlework, designs.
Dress designs, knitting, crocheting, etc.
Cartoons, comics, landscapes, buildings, etc.
Pictures, portraits, photographs, etc.
Still life, bowls, furniture, fruit, etc.
Copy maps, designs, decorations, blue prints for woodwork, machines, knitting, needlework.

This amazing new invention makes it easy for anyone to draw instantly!!

ONLY $1.98 COMPLETE

Now, anyone from 5 to 90 can easily draw, paint, or sketch almost anything quickly and accurately the very first time you use the Master Art Helper. You draw like a professional artist even if you have never drawn before. Thousands who were told they were "hopeless" at drawing, now draw like professional artists, and draw those "tough" maps and paintings with ease! No matter what you want to draw with the use of the Master Art Helper, it is automatically seen on any sheet of paper, then you easily, quickly trace the picture on the paper because you already see it there—and in color too! It develops children's art ability and improves their drawing technique! With the Master Art Helper you will draw an accurate professional-type drawing that anyone would think an experienced artist had drawn. This often helps students to get better grades in school! The Master Art Helper makes it easy to draw or copy anything you wish to draw larger or smaller or any size you wish, and is excellent for drawing *MAPS* usually required of students. It can be used easily on any table, board, or desk anywhere, at home or in school. The Master Art Helper is used to draw photographs both in-doors and out-doors. It requires absolutely no lessons or practice. If you write with a pencil you can easily draw anything with the Master Art Helper. Master Art Helper can help you be popular and can give you lots of hours of enjoyment.

HOW IT WORKS

Simply look through the Master Art Helper and see what you want to draw right on the paper you are using. All you do is trace the drawing – like magic you have drawn a perfect professional picture!

WIN POPULARITY! BE ADMIRED!

Your friends will ask you to draw them and you will easily be able to do it. The Master Art Helper will make you popular. Thousands find that after a short time they can draw well without the Master Art Helper. It helps anyone to develop skills and artistic ability which often leads to a good paying career in art. Helps you draw window cards, maps, signs, portraits, living subects, and used by many store keepers.

FREE! "Easily Understood Tricks Of The Artist". This valuable illustrated booklet, "Easily Understood Tricks Of The Artist" will be included free with your Master Art Helper. This booklet will help you understand many of the techniques of the proper shading and proportion and so forth, that are used in drawing human figures and maps. And, will help you improve your drawing skill.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE. 10 DAY FREE TRIAL

If the Master Art Helper doesn't help you to draw anything you want to draw. If you can't draw people, animals, maps, figures, or anything else like a professional artist with this Master Art Helper, return it within 10 days and your money will be refunded.

Standard Model $1.98

MASTER ART HELPER CO.
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

Excellent for drawing required in school, office, shop, or store

10 DAY FREE TRIAL! MAIL COUPON NOW!

MASTER ART HELPER CO. Dept. 19
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

Rush me the Master Art Helper and your free booklet, "Easily Understood Tricks Of The Artist"

☐ I enclose $1.98 send postage prepaid

I understand I can return this merchandise after a 10 day trial and my money will be refunded.

☐ I enclose $2.98 send Deluxe Model.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

SENT ON APPROVAL

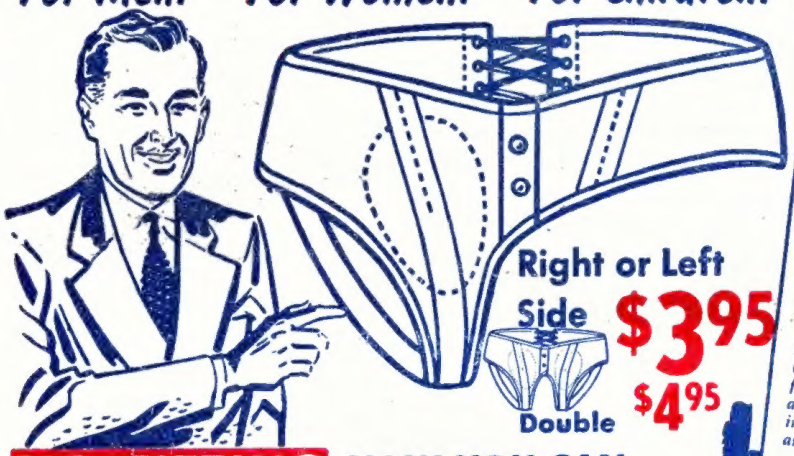
HERE IS IMMEDIATE COMFORT FOR YOU WITH

RUPTURE-EASER

Reg. in U. S. Pat. Off.

(A PIPER BRACE PRODUCT)

For Men! For Women! For Children!



Right or Left Side **$3.95**

Double **$4.95**

NO FITTING REQUIRED!

NOW YOU CAN . . . THROW AWAY THOSE GOUGING, TORTURING TRUSSES --- GET NEW WONDERFUL RELIEF WITH RUPTURE-EASER

A strong, form-fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Snaps up in front. Adjustable back-lacing and adjustable leg straps. Soft flat groin pad—no steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort, invisible under light clothing. Washable. Also used as after operation support. Sizes for men, women and children. Easy to Order—MAIL COUPON NOW! (Note: Be sure to give size and side when ordering)

OVER 400,000 GRATEFUL USERS!

Unsolicited Testimonials From Our Thousands on File:

R. C. of Corvallis, Oregon, Air Mails: *"Send me another Rupture-Easer so I will have one to change off with. It is enabling me to work at top speed at my press machine 8 hrs. a day."*

Mr. P. S. of New York City wants us to know he is—*"very pleased with my Rupture-Easer. It has given me great relief and I feel more safe than ever in wearing this support."*

M. S. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: *"It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."*

M. D. S. of Greenwich, N. Y. writes: *"I find my Rupture-Easer the most comfortable and satisfactory of any truss I have ever worn."*

Mrs. L. H. C., Blackburn, Mo. writes: *"The Rupture-Easer I bought from you has done so much good I couldn't forget you this Christmas season."*

THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PROVED PERFORMANCE ORDER TODAY!

THE MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT

Rupture-Easer is the most [illegible] support on the market today. Thousands of people who have tried old-fashioned, expensive devices turn to Rupture-Easer for amazing new comfort. Rupture-Easer is easy to wear.

RUPTURE-EASER IS SANITARY

Unlike oldtime cumbersome supports Rupture-Easer is comfortable and sanitary. It can be washed without harm to the fabric. You never offend when you wear Rupture-Easer.

EASY TO ORDER

Just measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and state right or left side or double.

10 DAY TRIAL OFFER

Money-back guarantee if you don't get relief.

DELAY MAY BE SERIOUS ORDER TODAY

Piper Brace Co., Dept. DO-92
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.

PIPER BRACE CO., 811 Wyandotte, Dept. DO-92 Kansas City 6, Mo.

Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side	☐ $3.95	Measure around lowest part
Left Side	☐ $3.95	of my abdomen is
Double	☐ $4.95	.....INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s
Note: Be sure to give size and side when ordering

Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for $..... ☐ Send C. O. D.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....